

ISLAM AND NATIONALIST MOBILIZATION IN KAZAKHSTAN: POST-SOVIET CULTURAL [RE]FRAMING AND IDENTITY [RE]MAKING

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This article, embracing Laruelle’s observation that Kazakhstan “presents itself as a bridge linking the Western, Muslim, and Asian worlds” critically explores the intricate dynamics of cultural reframing and identity reconstruction amid post-Soviet nationalist mobilization. Kazakhstan’s steadfast commitment to projecting a ‘bridge image’ for strategic geopolitical advantages is evident through state-mechanized ‘nation branding’ strategies within a ‘soft-authoritarian’ secular political environment conducive to nationalist mobilization. The article methodologically investigates the role of Islam, often obscured in this context, through an analysis of “elite responses” reflecting the state’s stance on religion. The theoretical examination substantiated by thematic analysis of ethnographic data unveils that Islam, strategically instrumentalized for political objectives, exerts a profound influence on the “collective consciousness” of the local populace, predominantly composed of ethnic Kazakhs. This influence significantly contributes to the nuanced [re] construction of tradition, identity, and culture in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, thereby shedding light on the interconnectedness of state-driven narratives, political strategies, and the pivotal role played by Islam in shaping the cultural and identity landscape of the region.

Keywords: *Islam, Kazakhstan, nationalist-mobilization, identity, national culture*

A. Introduction

Over seven decades, the atheistic secularization imposed by the Soviet regime resulted in what Wolters (2014: 13) describes as an “onslaught on religious communities” in the Central Asian region. This state-mechanized ‘*controlling*’, aptly characterized by Achilov (2015) as “uprooting,’ of the socio-political dimensions of religion, notably marginalized Islam. Consequently, the predominant religion in the regional context was reduced to a “vague marker” of cultural identity in both Sovietological and post-Soviet literature (Gunn, 2014; Khalid, 2007). However, in the aftermath of gaining independence, Kazakhstan’s overt state policy aimed at reconciling the “continuity” of the Soviet legacy with a “return” to the nation’s historical and cultural heritage. The formal declaration of “religious freedom,” representing a *de jure* departure from the Soviet discursive project of *Homo Sovieticus* (Brubaker, 1996: 23; Smith, 1996), facilitated the resurgence of diverse forms of religious phenomena. A noteworthy transformation in this context was the gradual revitalization of Islam as a foundational element for the restoration of spiritual heritage, cultural integrity, and historical tradition (Nazarbayev, 2010: 48-55).

The impact of Islamic revival, academically conceptualized as “Islamic revivalism,” manifested on two levels. Individually, it was evident in growing participation in various explicit forms of worship (*ibadah*), such as prayer (*salah*), fasting (*sawm*), and obligatory charity (*zakah*) (Malik, 2019). Likewise, the number of Muslims adhering to the “normative principles” – the do’s (*halal*) and don’ts (*haram*) of Muslim social behavior – and identifying with Muslimness (*musulmonchilik* in Kazakh) experienced a relative increase. Concurrently, Islam resurfaced in collective

or public life (Sharipova, 2019). The relationship between the state and society concerning Islam assumed a structured form, exemplified by the growing instrumentalization and institutionalization of the “Islamic factor” (Malik, 2019).

The onset of Islamic revivalism in Kazakhstan, akin to its occurrence in neighboring Central Asian nations, coincided with the emergence of the Western narrative surrounding “political Islam” or “radical Islam.” This narrative, an intricate form of neo-Orientalism, permeated a significant body of literature responding to the transnational movement of “Islamic revivalism.” The predominant Western discourse on Islamic revival, characterized by a “decontextualized” construction, was further bolstered by the surge of post-9/11 “reactionary” Islamophobic literature, which extensively stereotyped the global perception of Muslims and framed Islam “as a religion to be feared and fought” (Esposito, 2010: 3). Scholars, significantly influenced by the “social proof” in intellectual analysis (Cialdini, 2007), frequently conflated distinct and occasionally contrasting contexts when examining post-Soviet political, religious (specifically Islam), and cultural issues. Frequently neglecting the unique aspects of the local Kazakh context and failing to differentiate it from the global landscape, post-Soviet scholarship often essentialized “Islamic revivalism” into a singular narrative of “Islamic extremism”—a monolithic phenomenon perceived as a threat to Kazakhstan’s secular establishment.

Despite this overarching trend, the critical questions essential for contextualizing the discourse on Islamic revival in Kazakhstan boil down to two fundamental inquiries. *Firstly, does Kazakhstan’s Islamic revival constitute an interrelated socio-cultural revival or exclusively a political endeavor? Secondly, is Islam an integral component of the post-Soviet nationalist*

mobilization process? While I have analytically addressed the nuanced dimensions of the first question elsewhere (Malik, 2019), the second question, owing to its significance and nature, necessitates a comprehensive analysis. In pursuit of an answer to the second question, I adopt a methodological approach based on a two-fold strategy. Firstly, I seek a theoretical examination of the relationship between Islam and nationalist mobilization in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. This involves a comprehensive review of available literature, official documents, and relevant theoretical perspectives to develop a nuanced understanding of the potential links, influences, and dynamics between Islam and nationalist mobilization. Subsequently, I present a thematic analysis of “elite responses”: perspectives, statements, or actions of key figures within the socio-political elite of Kazakhstan, gathered during ethnographic fieldwork. The recurrent themes and responses were analyzed to explore the role of Islam in post-Soviet cultural reframing and identity remaking. Drawing upon the findings, I contend that Islam, beyond being instrumentalized through political rhetoric for political purposes, profoundly influences the “collective memory and consciousness” of the local populace, predominantly comprising ethnic Kazakhs, in the [re]construction of tradition, identity, and culture—fundamental elements of the nationalist mobilization process. However, establishing Islam’s role in nationalist mobilization does not equate to a “positive framing” of Islam in electoral politics; rather, it reflects the extent of social and political consideration accorded to its historical and cultural presence.

B. Research Methodology

The chosen methodology, a fusion of content analysis and ethnographic fieldwork, holds particular relevance in

unraveling the multifaceted intricacies of cultural reframing and identity dynamics in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. By leveraging content analysis, the research ensures a structured lens to discern patterns and themes within the collected material. This analytical approach proves instrumental in distilling valuable insights from a diverse array of interviews conducted in two key Kazakh cities. The deliberate selection of Almaty and Astana (now Nur-Sultan) for ethnographic fieldwork acknowledges their strategic significance, providing a rich context for exploring the historical, cultural, religious, and political dimensions of Kazakhstan.

To capture a spectrum of perspectives, a purposive sampling technique was employed to conduct ten in-depth “elite interviews” with high-profile officials and religious authorities associated with the administration. These interviews were strategically chosen for their representation of the ‘stateside,’ direct involvement in religious activities, and substantial Soviet experience. Key figures interviewed included H.E. Berik Aryn, Vice Minister, Ministry of Religious Affairs and Civil Society, H.E. Yerkin E. Ongbarbayev, Chairman of the Committee for Religious Affairs, and Mr. Aydar Parkululy Abuov, Director of the International Center of Cultures and Religions. The interviews also encompassed officials from the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan (SAMK), including the former chief mufti of Kazakhstan (H.E. Haji Abdul Sattar Derbasili) and the two active deputy muftis (*neyib muftis*). Additionally, four imams were interviewed, chosen for their roles as a “bridge factor” between state, society, and religion. All the four *imams* interviewed represented significant mosques, because of their location, diversity of attendants, capacity, and high-class architecture, namely Hazret Sultan Mosque and Nur-

Astana Mosque (both located in Astana) and City Central Mosque and Nur-Mubarakh Mosque (both located in Almaty). The questions posed were open-ended, capturing detailed and descriptive responses. The ensuing thematic analysis, based on common themes such as Islamic revival, cultural heritage, Kazakh tradition, nation-building, *Kazakhness*, and identity, facilitated the extraction of key insights from diverse responses. This methodological approach effectively transformed the detailed responses into a more structured, close-ended format for analysis, contributing to a nuanced exploration of the research questions.

Table 1: Elite Interview results (in percentage)

Islam and Politics in Kazakhstan	No comment (or not sure). (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	Maybe (%)
1. Is Islamic revival a reality in Kazakhstan?	0	0	100	0
2. Does “Islamic revival” imply the revival of Islamic politics or any sort of development of Islamic political institutions in Kazakhstan?	0	100	0	0
3. Is Islam, as an ethnic and cultural factor, part of the “nation-building” process?	0	10	70	20
4. Is Islam an axiomatic part of the state’s identity-formation discourse?	0	20	50	30
5. Do you think, the “Islamic revivalism” phenomenon is positively affecting the nationalist mobilization process?	10	20	20	50

6. Is Islam part of Kazakhstan's foreign policies, especially when it comes to Kazakhstan's diplomatic relations with Muslim countries?	20	30	20	30
7. Do you think Islam can coexist with the secular democracy of Kazakhstan?	0	0	70	30
8. Is it possible, in the near or far future, that Kazakhstan will allow any religious party to participate in electoral politics?	10	80	0	10

C. Nationalist Mobilization: Theoretical Analysis

After gaining independence, the political leadership of Kazakhstan internalized the concept that the transformation of the republic into a cohesive nation-state is a complex process requiring deliberate efforts. Consequently, a prerequisite for this transformation is identified in the form of a unifying narrative centered on nationalist mobilization. Since the 1990s, the complexity arising from ethnic heterogeneity has led to the contemplation of ethnic nationalism and civic nationalism—two fundamental yet inherently distinct facets of nationalism—within the state's policy discourse. Scholars have keenly observed this evolving dynamic, noting the state's heightened awareness of the “potential pressure” from Russian influences, prompting a strategic emphasis on the “imagined” project of a Kazakhstani nation (*Qazaqstandyq ult* in Kazakh and *Kazakhstanskaia natsiia* in Russian). Nursultan Nazarbayev's conceptualization of the “primordial Kazakh land” (*iskonnoi Kazakhskoi zemle*) propelled civic nationalism, declaring Kazakhstan as a homeland for all its inhabitants

(*narod Kazakhstana*). This *supraethnic* identity, distinct from the ethnic Kazakh-centric identity, seeks to synthesize pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet layers of meaning, memory, and belonging. Despite the predominantly “top-down” approach employed by the state, the simultaneous recognition of “bottom-up” dynamics, particularly in terms of shared history and ethnic belongingness, underscores the nuanced nature of nationalist mobilization policy and discourse. The “bottom-up” perspective is notably characterized by the intertwining of ethnicity and culture, exemplified through the “Kazakhization” or “kazakhification” process, wherein the notion of “[ethnic] Kazakhs first among [all] equals” is promoted (Burkhanov & Sharipova, 2015; Davenel, 2012; Ó Beacháin & Kevlihan, 2015; Sarsembayev, 1999; Sharipova, 2019; Surucu, 2002). In navigating the trajectory of nationalist mobilization, the state’s “soft-authoritarian” political framework strategically engages and integrates these dual forms of nationalism, aiming to legitimize its authority, foster interethnic harmony, and propel Kazakhstan toward a controlled secular democratic advancement (Hiro, 2018; Kolossov, 1999; Laruelle, 2015).

This article engages in an examination of nationalism and nationalist mobilization in Kazakhstan by delving into Hutchinson’s culturalist conceptualization of nationalism and Madani’s theory of “composite nationalism” (Hutchinson, 1987; Madani, 2005). Hutchinson’s culturalist perspective describes the ‘nation’ as an outcome of historically shared culture (*thaqafah al-mushtarika*). This framing is more fitting to the scope of this article as it aligns with the metacontext of culturalist discourse, which encompasses both the primordialism and Smith’s ethnosymbolism. Primordialism places primary importance on the role of “primordial ties” as a major factor that influences the process of national mobilization

(Conversi, 2007; Shil, 1957; Yoshino, 1992). Hutchison (1987) theorizes nationalism as “a culturally distinct and historically-rooted way of life” which is defended by *returning* to its “creative life-principle”. Conversely, ethnosymbolism posits that myths, memories, values, traditions, and symbols constitute the foundational characteristics upon which a nation can be constructed (Leoussi & Grosby, 2007; Smith, 2009). Within Smith’s ethnosymbolism framework, scholars, literary figures, artists, and poets play a crucial role in enabling the modern nation to draw sustenance from a relived ancient glorious past, establishing a connection with earlier ethnies or ethnic communities (Conversi, 2007; Smith, 2009). In the context of post-Soviet nationalist mobilization discourse, there are evident areas of overlap between primordialism and ethnosymbolism, influencing the analytical propositions presented in this article. This overlap is observable in the responses collected from “elite interviews” and the empirical evidence provided in the following section.

Madani’s conceptualization of nationalism delves into Islam’s association with the “territoriality” of *watan* (country) and *qaum* (nation). Within the broader Muslim context, two distinct approaches engaging with different facets of nationalism (*Anwar al-qawmiyyah*) have evolved. The first approach is Islamic Nationalism (*al-qawmiyyah al-Islamiyyah*), emphasizing the ethno-cultural dimension of Islam in nationalist mobilization. The second is Islamic Ummatism (*al-ummatiyah*), advocating a supra-nationalist concept of *ummah* (*fikrah al-qawmiyyah al-‘ulya: al-ummah*), emphasizing the universality of “all-embracing” Islamic principles in trans-national Islamic movements (Ali, 2014; Ayoob, 2008; Ayubi, 1991; Eikelman & Piscatori, 1997; Khatab, 2006; Malik, 1999; Mawdudi, 1993). In this article,

Madani's "composite nationalism" is chosen for exploration, focusing on the boundaries of the discourse on "Islamic nationalism." Scripturally justifying his theory, Madani applies the "covenantal theory" found in the "Treaty of Medina" (*mithaq al-Madīnah*). Madani's theory stands as a unique instance of Muslim integration into nationalist discourse or, in other words, the "nationalization of Islam" in recent Muslim history (Madani, 2005). This theorization is applied in the article to comprehend the responses of "religious elites" of Kazakhstan in elucidating Islam's role in cultural cohesion and the nationalist mobilization process.

Additionally, I incorporate Barth's concept of boundaries (Barth, 1996). These boundaries, considered variables in the context of this article, socially construct the meaning, applicability, and orientation of collective identities and nationalistic sentiments. Consequently, boundaries give rise to a sense of "dialectic inwardness and outwardness," defining people in terms of "them" and "us." Boundaries encapsulate various critical sensibilities of Kazakhstan, including genealogy, culture, religion, and territory. These elements, having traversed a historical process and undergone different phases of "social convergence," have become intricately entwined. As a result, the impact of one variable, such as religion, fortifies the impact of another variable, such as ethnicity, in generating a "common effect" — exemplified by *Kazakhness* in this case. Given the enduring challenges and changes, achieving an absolute disentanglement of different variables from the "common effect" becomes inherently impractical. An analytic understanding of the "common effect" requires an in-depth analysis of all other variables. Neglecting the role of any single variable might lead to miscalculated formulations.

D. Nationalist Mobilization of Kazakhstan in Theoretical Context

The dynamics of nationalist mobilization in Kazakhstan are characterized by a “paradoxical relationship” between the state’s political rhetoric and on-ground political actions. On one hand, the political establishment, influenced by a lingering Soviet and communist mindset, subjects the overall “Islamic factor” to intense securitization (Yemelianova, 2014). However, on the other hand, Kazakhstan’s government, seeking to enhance diplomatic ties with economically influential Muslim nations like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, and Turkey, strategically portrays the country with a “religious” image linked historically to Islam and the global Muslim community (*ummah*). Navigating this complex situation poses practical challenges in developing nuanced perspectives on the state’s engagement with Islam. Post-independence, Kazakhstan’s intellectuals and political elites grappled with numerous issues as they endeavored to reconnect the broken tradition and reconcile the “fractured parts of their history” (Akiner, 1995: 1). The process of constructing a national identity has experienced fluctuations over the past two and a half decades, causing divisions among intellectuals and ethnic communities. Nursultan Nazarbayev articulated these concerns in the years following independence:

“We [people of Kazakhstan] should realize that, on one hand, we have the challenge of internal fragmentation and, on the other hand, external cultural forces are affecting our culture. These two factors add to the fact that the “cultural integrity” of the Kazakh nation is far away from the [true] ideals. If [I am worried] we do not wake up, we will be torn into pieces by the movement of history because

different “cultural patterns” within the Kazakh nation will move toward the different centers of attraction (Nazarbayev, 2003: 12).”

While practically challenging to construct a nation-state solely based on Kazakh ethnicity, the burgeoning government recognized the need for a foundation or, in Laitin’s terms, an “available repertoire” delineating the boundaries of the nation-building process (Laitin, 1998: 17). Responding to circumstantial pressures, Kazakhstan was proclaimed as the homeland of the “people of Kazakhstan,” ensuring equality for all citizens of the Republic (Ametbek, 2017). Mindful of potential ethnic conflicts, a “civic” understanding of nationalism was promoted, leading to the identification of the country’s inhabitants not as Kazakh people or *Kazakh Uli* (which might underrepresent other ethnic communities) but as “Kazakhstani” people, symbolizing equal citizenship for all ethnicities. However, Kazakh nationalists contested the state’s top-down or statist model, emphasizing the historical presence and struggles of Kazakhs, the indigenous ethnic group, on this “sacred” land, citing examples such as the sacrifices of *Alash Orda*, a political movement led by Kazakh nationalist intellectuals (Kesici, 2016). Their advocacy centered on the Kazakh language, culture, and religion as the primary attributes of independent Kazakhstan (Aitymbetov, 2015; Ó Beacháin & Kevlihan, 2011). Evaluating both sides of the equation, the Nazarbayev government aimed to strike a balance between the modernist project of “civic nationalism” and the demands of “ethnic nationalism.” While promoting the visibility of Kazakh culture, language, and history, it also exercised caution not to alienate other ethnicities, particularly Russians. The ongoing debate persists in a passive academic form rather than dynamic political engagement.

In the contemporary demographic landscape, where ethnic Kazakhs constitute approximately 68 percent of the total population (CIA Report 2020) and wield significant influence in bureaucracy, it is argued that the “Kazakhstani government,” predominantly led by ethnic Kazakhs, is subtly steering “Kazakhstani society” toward a process akin to “ethnic nationalism” through institutional structures (Cummings, 2006; ÓBeacháin & Kevlihan, 2011; Olcott, 2002; Peyrouse, 2008). Despite rhetorical claims of treating all citizens equally, the state exhibits a strategic patronization of Kazakh “ethnic belonging,” evident in the evolution of the country’s constitutions in 1993 and 1995. The preamble of 1993 constitution introduces Kazakhstan in an inclusive civic expression, “*We, the people of Kazakhstan, as an inseparable part of the world community, take the unshakeable Kazakh statehood into our consciousness [...]*,” while as the constitution of 1995 describes Kazakhstan in a soft but visible ethnic expression, “*We, the people of Kazakhstan, united by a common historic fate, creating a state on the indigenous Kazak land [...]*” (Constitution of RK). Scholars have labeled Kazakhstan as a “nationalizing state in the process of promoting an ethno-nationalist agenda” based on these constitutional changes (Commercio, 2004). The introduction of “soft ethnic nationalism” through constitutional amendments lays the foundation for, as aptly described by Kesici “Kazakhstan as the homeland of ethnic Kazakhs,” influencing the nationalist mobilization process (Kesici, 2011; Kesici, 2016; Malik, 2019; Sharipova, 2019). The discourse of “soft ethnic nationalism” was further expounded by the president Nazarbayev himself in the *Order on the Conception of the Formation of State Identity of the Republic of Kazakhstan* in May 1996. As cited by Kesici (2011), the order starts with the ethnic nationalist hypothesis

that “every state emerges on the basis of an ethnic community, and that every ethnic group needs its own state to provide for the material and spiritual needs of this ethnic group” (Constitution of RK). President Nazarbayev himself expounded on the discourse of “soft ethnic nationalism” in the *Order on the Conception of the Formation of State Identity of the Republic of Kazakhstan* in May 1996. The order begins with the ethnic nationalist hypothesis that “every state emerges on the basis of an ethnic community, and that every ethnic group needs its own state to provide for the material and spiritual needs of this ethnic group” (Constitution of RK). Nazarbayev’s assertion reinforces the idea that Kazakhstan is the territorial center of the ethnic Kazakhs, a crucial factor to consider in any nation-building project or process (Brubaker, 1996; Cummings, 2005; Danilovich, 2010; Jones, 2010; Kendirbaeva, 1999; Ó Beacháin & Kevlihan, 2013; Shirin 1995).

This is where I establish the connection between Islam and the nationalist mobilization in Kazakhstan. I argue that understanding Kazakhstan’s nationalist mobilization requires contextualizing it within the historical interplay where Islam has been instrumental in shaping a cohesive Kazakh identity—a form of communitarian “social solidarity” in Durkheim’s terms (Durkheim, 2001). Reformulating this proposition, I contend that Kazakh culture absorbed Islamic traditions, preserving them, and reciprocally, Islamic tradition safeguarded Kazakhness during the challenging historical periods. Simplifying it further, “Islam, identity, and cultural heritage of Kazakhstan” have become historically intertwined variables influencing both the meaning and existence. Therefore, to regenerate the national culture, shaped by different historical phases, all relevant variables that have contributed to its formation are essential.

In the early 1990s, Kazakhstan committed to a secular government, as reflected in articles 1, 5, 19, and 22 of the Constitution declaring the republic as sovereign, democratic, legal, secular, and Unitarian. The first constitutional stance on religion was established by the “Law on Freedom of Belief and Religious Associations” in 1992, emphasizing that no religion could be established as an obligatory or state religion. Despite adopting a “communist-like secularist” approach, one of the first changes made by the Nazarbayev government after breaking away from the Soviet’s Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM) was the establishment of a separate *muftiate* (government-controlled religious board) under the name of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan (Qazaqstan *MusyImandary Dini Basqarmasy* in Kazakh) (Malik, 2019). Rhetorically, Nazarbayev emphasized the significance of Islamic faith in preserving history and Kazakhstan’s cultural heritage. In one of his early writings, “Critical Decade,” Nazarbayev (2010) expressed:

“We Kazakhs view Islam as a lofty ideal, a factor defining our global outlook and a symbol enabling us to pay our respect to our ancestry and our rich Muslim culture, which at one time was on the brink of fading into oblivion (p. 54).”

Likewise, the First President’s support for “officially approved” Hanafi Islam in his presidential address at the sixteenth congress of the Nur Otan Party, Kazakhstan’s ruling political party, underscores the intricate relationship between Islam and the nation-building process. In his address to the gathering, he stated:

“Hanafi Islam that we [Kazakhs] adhere to and that historically developed on the territory of Kazakhstan is characterized by modesty, tolerance and sensible interpretation of Islamic values. This is exactly what we need for our secular state.”

The phenomenon of “Islamic revivalism” is undergoing a substantial and widespread expansion throughout Kazakhstan. Islam is progressively shifting from an individualized experience to a collective phenomenon, manifesting in diverse realms encompassing religious spaces, public markets, and media platforms, and contributing to the shaping of national identity. A body of empirical research, spanning disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, ethnography, and political studies, conducted in various regions of Kazakhstan, attests to a pronounced escalation in the “individual religiosity” of Kazakhs within the civic domain (Achilov, 2015; Bigozhin, 2018; Junisbai et al., 2017; Privratsky, 2001; Rorlich, 2003; Schwab, 2011; Schwab, 2019). A predominant majority of Muslims in Kazakhstan adhere to foundational religious tenets, including the belief in the oneness of God (*tawhid*), acceptance of Prophethood (*risalah*), and conviction in an afterlife (*akhirah*) (Pew Research 2013 & 2017; Friedrich Ebert Foundation Kazakhstan 2016). Additionally, there is an increased commitment to obligatory religious practices such as salah (*namaz* in Kazakh), sawm (*oraza* in Kazakh), and the observance of *halal* dietary regulations. The proliferation of mosques (*meshit* in Kazakh) nationwide surged from a meager 63 in 1991 to 3000 in 2018, indicating a substantial 37-fold increment over 25 years. The number of madrasas registered with the muftiate is 9, with a total enrollment of around 1800 students (SAMK, 2018). Thirty percent of Kazakhstan’s Muslims observe fasting during the month of

Ramadan (Pew Research 2013). The number of Hajj pilgrims to the holy city of Makkah increased from 228 in 2001 to 3000 in 2018, significantly surpassing the figures from the Soviet period (e-History, 2013; Inform.Kz, 2018). Women dressed modestly (wearing headscarves) are increasingly visible in marketplaces and main streets. Islamic practices, embedded in cultural contexts, are observed during family events, such as births (*tuylu* in Kazakh), circumcisions (*sundet* in Kazakh), marriage ceremonies (*nekeh* in Kazakh), and funeral rituals (*jinaza* in Kazakh). Moreover, there is a notable rise in the number of couples seeking a “mosque blessing” and legalizing their marriages through Islamic customs, in contrast to the Soviet period.

The burgeoning *halal* industry in Kazakhstan, encompassing sectors such as halal banking, halal food products, halal restaurants, pharmaceuticals, and halal cosmetics, has experienced substantial growth (Oryngaliul et al., 2020; Pak, 2020). Specifically, the Islamic financial sector in Kazakhstan has exhibited superior growth rates compared to neighboring Central Asian countries over the past decade (Hoggarth, 2016; Ernst & Young Report 2014; Thomson Reuters & Dinar Standard, 2018; Wolters, 2013). The resurgence of halal as a consumer preference holds profound behavioral and cultural significance, with Marlene Laruelle (2018), a leading expert on Central Asia, characterizing it as the re-emergence of “bourgeois” Islam, practiced and embraced by the urban middle classes. Presently, Kazakhstan boasts 130 halal slaughterhouses and over 600 halal businesses, a substantial increase from the eight halal special units in 2002 (ITE Food & Drink, 2017; Malik, 2019). Halal products, featuring the halal brand logo, are prominently displayed in bazaars and shopping malls to cater to Muslim consumers

who prioritize adhering to halal standards (Nor'azman, 2015; Uatkhanov, 2017). These empirical observations align with Rorlich's assertion that post-Soviet Kazakhstan is undergoing a process of "re-Islamisation" (Rorlich, 2003). Regardless of its specific forms or character, I contend that this process of "re-Islamization" or "Islamic revivalism" sociologically represents a socio-cultural manifestation of religious functions, influencing the reframing of public cultural dynamics in Kazakhstan. Furthermore, it aids in comprehending the significant intersections between behavior, culture, and religion that underpin the social meanings of "belonging" and the integration of traditional values in the reconstruction of modern Kazakhstani society.

Predictably, in the post-independence era, the pronouncements of Kazakhstan's First President regarding Islam were strategically positioned to recognize it as a potent historical force for nation-building—a significant source of "traditional practice" capable of conferring social legitimacy and rallying collective consciousness (Omelicheva, 2016; Sabhlok, 2007; Sharipova, 2019). Within the context of a deliberate "return to tradition," the cultural and historical appeal of Islam was perceived as a fundamental cohesive element linking the indigenous people of Kazakhstan, fostering an awareness of a "common culture" rooted in the past and connecting it with the politically transitional present (Beyer & Finke, 2019; Gunn, 2003; Yemelianova, 2014). The enduring cohesive strength of Islam, which even the Soviets could not eradicate at its core, is now experiencing renewed social impetus in redefining postcolonial notions of tradition and identity. Olcott (1995) in her analysis of post-Soviet states, observed that "the consciousness of having an Islamic heritage was one of the elements which for the

Central Asians [including Kazakhstan] continued to define their identities” (p.21). Gleason (1997) similarly noted that Islam’s social cohesive strength for Central Asians lies in the understanding that “[to] be a Muslim means to live in their traditional style and to practice rituals related to their beliefs” (p.42). Nazarbayev strategically invoked Islamic identity, intertwining it with Kazakh identity, employing emotional rhetoric to leverage Islam’s cohesive appeal ingrained in its spiritual, traditional, and moral fabric for nationalist purposes (Omelicheva, 2010; Omelicheva, 2016). For instance, Nazarbayev acknowledged Islam’s role in the development of modern Kazakh nationhood in public statements such as “I believe that Islam purifies a human being’s spiritual world by teaching [...] to help each other in difficult situations, to unite around a state, to love one’s Motherland” (Khabar TV, 2000). This portrayal carries political undertones, presenting Islam, particularly the “Islam of forefathers’ Kazakhstan,” as a moral and spiritual inspiration fueling patriotic fervor toward the homeland (Kazakhstan) and fostering loyalty to the state.

The theoretical framework contextualizes the policy of the Nazarbayev government, elucidating the utilization of “religious symbols” and “religious rhetoric” within the post-Soviet political discourse. Nazarbayev’s “religio-political” pronouncements, such as designating Kazakhstan as a “proud part of the Muslim ummah,” asserting that “Kazakhs have never lost their religion,” and proclaiming that “this (Islam) will unite us,” exemplify a broader nationalist political structuration. In this framework, the “Islamic factor,” albeit selectively employed, is invoked to foster socio-cultural integration, akin to “social solidarity” in a Durkheimian context (Malik, 2019). These statements are predominantly featured in annual addresses, Islamic festivals (such as *Kurban*

bairam/ait and *Ramazán* or *Oraza bairam/ait*), and mosque inauguration ceremonies (Omeliicheva, 2016).

Likewise, governmental initiatives, including Nazarbayev's programs like "*Ruhani Zhangyru*" (spiritual modernization), "*MangilikEl*" (eternal nation), and the revival of the "Sacral Geography of Kazakhstan" (*Qazaqstannyn kieli jerlerinin*), serve the dual purpose of preserving the national culture of Kazakhstan, where Islamic tradition holds historical significance and aligning it with the state's nationalistic structuration of patriotism (Akorda Press 2017; Burkhanov 2019; Patriotic Act 2016; Yerekesheva 2019). Despite academic perceptions of Nazarbayev's statements regarding Islam as manipulative, a historical analytic reference suggests that such statements outwardly convey the notion that modern Kazakhstan cannot be "imagined" in isolation from its historical and cultural roots. In the words of Nazarbayev himself:

"The new modernization should not, as happened before, look at historic experience arrogantly. Rather it must be built on the best traditions and make them important pillars for future success. Without national and cultural roots, modernization will be left hanging in the air. And I want it to stand firm. History and national traditions must be taken into account (Akorda Press, 2017)."

The rhetorical approach employed by the government involves discrediting the perceived threat of so-called "fundamentalist" Islam as incompatible with Kazakhstan's forefathers' Islam and inherently un-Islamic. The First President has consistently emphasized that "extremist Islam is political manipulation" and that "fanaticism has been alien to the tradition of Islam in Kazakhstan" (Dan,

2003). This discourse aims to delegitimize any association between extremism and the historical practice of Islam in Kazakhstan. To encapsulate this aspect of the discussion, Ongbarbayev's insights into the state's "paradoxical" position, conveyed during an interview with the researcher, are pertinent. Responding to the question on the state's "paradoxical" relationship with Islam, Ongbarbayev articulated, "The state's commitment to secularism must not bring any confusion. See, we [government] have time and again appealed nation to gather around the genealogical axis of our nation's history and culture. And, let me acknowledge the fact, that Islam is an important aspect of our nation's history and culture. Therefore, to build modern Kazakhstan, Islam's positive values need to be incorporated into the process (Ongbarbayev, 2017, July 20)."

E. Islam and Nationalist Mobilization: Approaching "Elite Perspective"

The process of nationalist mobilization, when viewed through a top-down perspective, involves elites who possess the capacity to define the essence of the nation and convey this definition both vertically and horizontally within society. It is contended that elite intellectuals play a pivotal role in shaping the socio-political attitudes of the masses, thereby influencing public sentiment towards the state, particularly in times of transition. Influential social theorists, such as Max Weber and John Breuilly, attribute to intellectuals the crucial task of fostering "national consciousness" (Gerth and Mills, 1946; Breuilly, 1982). Within the framework of ethnosymbolism, these intellectuals are viewed as "social bridges," connecting the past with the present and translating

symbols into viable, coherent identities and socio-political meanings in the modern context (Conversi, 2007). Since gaining independence, elite intellectuals in Kazakhstan have actively participated in the formation of a “national identity” amid an ethno-cultural revival. This discussion identifies two significant categories of elite intellectuals in post-Soviet Kazakhstani politics and society: administrative and religious elites. Each category occupies a distinct “functional space,” either within both the state and society or within one of the two. To substantiate this assertion, a thematic analysis of elite interviews is presented, aiming to systematically evaluate “official” stances on “Islamic revival” and the current socio-political landscape in the country (refer to Table 1). This exploration delves into the nuanced perspectives and roles of administrative and religious elites in shaping Kazakhstan’s evolving national identity and political trajectory.

The findings reveal a notable array of perspectives among elites regarding the emergence of “Islamic revivalism” in Kazakhstan, underscoring both shared and divergent viewpoints. A pivotal aspect of the analytic discussion commences with an exploration of how elites interpret and evaluate the phenomenon of Islamic revivalism, which has unmistakably evolved into a social movement in the country. For example, Berik Aryn (personal communication, July 12, 2017), then Vice Minister, Ministry of Religious Affairs and Civil Society (now renamed as The Social Development Ministry), outlined that, “Islam is the historical and cultural tradition of Kazakhstan” and, given that, “it is state’s responsibility to preserve nation’s history and cultural heritage”. He asserted further, “Government is allowing construction of new mosques and managing funds for *mufityate* [...] (Aryn, 2017, July 12). Besides, government’s projects such as *Ruhani*

Zhangyru (spiritual modernization) include restoration of *ziyarat*s (sacred Islamic pilgrimage sites), which is part of our culture.” Aryn’s statements reflect the social realism of the state towards the revival of religion- particularly Islam. It fits well with the culturalist theory of nationalism that talks about primordial ties, values, and traditions. Moreover, it resonates with the First President’s call that, “We [Kazakhs] need to build a religious consciousness which is in harmony with the traditions and cultural norms of the country (SAMK, 2018).

Nevertheless, taking a moderate theological position, Haji Abdul Sattar Derbisali (personal communication, July 25, 2017), former chairman of SAMK and chief-mufti of Kazakhstan, embraces the notion that, “revival (or *ihya* in Arabic) is an inherent concept within the Islamic tradition. Islam never falls. [...] Islam remained ingrained in our culture and it will continue. Both are mutually reviving (Derbisali, 2017, July 25).” Derbisali’s perspective reflects a nuanced understanding of the symbiotic relationship between Islam and Kazakh culture. These two elite positions, which can be considered diverse, illuminate the influence of socialization, internalization, and educational training on the methodological approaches employed by elites. Despite their differences, both perspectives offer nuanced insights into the revival of Islamic tradition in Kazakhstan. The contrast in their views highlights the varied ways in which elites have been shaped by social, educational, and cultural factors, leading to distinct interpretations of the ongoing Islamic revival in the country. The Imam of Nur-Mubarak Mosque (personal communication, July 28, 2017) articulates the concept of Islamic revival within a relational framework, emphasizing the enduring Muslim identity of Kazakhs throughout historical challenges. According to the Imam, Kazakhs have consistently maintained

their Muslim identity even during periods of Russian and Soviet influence. He contends that Islam is resurging in society through cultural practices and spiritual functions. This relational perspective posits that Islam, throughout history, has not merely influenced but significantly transformed Kazakh culture and the understanding of *Kazakhness*. The Imam's rationale suggests that despite historical suppression, Islam retains the potential to exert a comparable impact, if not identical in degree, as observed in the past. This perspective aligns with sociological principles such as the "demand and supply" paradigm, which resonates with human behavior. It implies that cultural functioning generates corresponding cultural demands that manifest in the visible cultural space. For instance, if a growing number of Kazakhstani Muslims express a demand for *halal* food, a culturally significant dietary preference, restaurants would not only produce such food but also actively promote it publicly. This sociological interpretation underscores the intricate dynamics between cultural evolution and societal demands, illustrating how Islam's resurgence is intertwined with the broader cultural landscape of Kazakhstan.

Responses to questions 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 demonstrate significant diversity, reflecting the central, interconnected, and politically sensitive nature of these inquiries. In response to question 2, there is a consensus among respondents that the entirety of the state structure, including SAMK, adopts a unified position, affirming that the Islamic revival in Kazakhstan is fundamentally apolitical and primarily grounded in cultural, historical, and moral considerations. This unanimity underscores the perception that Kazakhstan's Islamic resurgence is driven by cultural and moral imperatives rather than political motivations. This alignment contributes

to the preservation and restoration of national culture and heritage. As postulated by Yerkin E. Ongbarbayev, Chairman of the Committee for Religious Affairs, Kazakhstan, that, "Revival of Islam in Kazakhstan is not something "naïve" to our culture. Islamic revival, as I approach it as a government official, finds meaning in the revival of our national culture. Our *Hanafi* tradition (a leading juristic school in *Sunni* Islam) is peaceful, cooperative, and apolitical (Ongbarbayev, 2017, July 30)." Aydar Parkululy Abuov (personal communication, July 28, 2017), Director of the International Center of Cultures and Religions, echoes these sentiments, affirming that the accepted Islam in Kazakhstan, both historically and presently, aligns seamlessly with the secular state mechanism, guiding the population in normative cultural ethics. This consensus underscores the perception that Kazakhstan's Islamic revival is culturally and ethically oriented, fostering harmony with the state's secular framework. He said, "The Islam we [Kazakhs] accept, historically and now, does not collide with the [secular] mechanism of the state [...] (Abuov, 2017, July 18).

This observation resonates with the context of secular Muslim nationalist movements such as the Kemalists in Turkey and the Pahlavis in Iran, who advocated for a clear separation between state and religion. However, in a more moderate tone, the Imam (personal communication, July 08, 2017) of the City Central Mosque in Almaty expressed a stance that is both apolitical and integrative. He emphasized that Islam encompasses a comprehensive social structure, addressing aspects ranging from family values to political ethics. Yet, he underscored that Islam primarily undergoes revival through cultural channels and should not be reduced to a mere political function. Similar sentiments were echoed by the Imam of Hazrat Sultan Mosque in Astana, who rejected

the notion of viewing Islam through a purely political lens. He asserted, “It is the falsification of reality to see it [Islam] in a totalitarian political prism. We witness a horizontal revival of Islam through Kazakh culture without skirmishing with the country’s secular mission (Imam, 2017, June 17).” Throughout the array of responses, a consistent theme emerges the interconnectedness of Islamic revivalism with Kazakh culture, tradition, and identity. This underscores a profound and shared bond between Islam and Kazakh culture, indicating that the resurgence of one inevitably accompanies the revitalization of the other. Indeed, the revival of Kazakh culture serves as a barometer for the resurgence of all elements that have historically shaped it, including Islam. Thus, the process of rekindling historical connections with “Kazakh Islam” highlights the inseparable link between Islam and the ethnic Kazakh identity.

The responses to questions 3, 4, and 5 carry significant thematic weight, revealing a consensus among elites regarding the acknowledgment of Islam’s role as an ethnic and cultural factor in the nation-building process. Berik Aryn (personal communication, July 12, 2017), who works with administration and knows the *inside* discourse, provided insightful perspectives on this matter. He emphasized the importance of symbolizing characteristics related to Kazakh culture, religion, and language, underscoring their vital role in shaping modern Kazakhstani identity. Aryn’s analysis situates Kazakhstan’s nationalism within a primordial and ethnosymbolic framework, wherein Islam, deeply embedded in shared culture and history, positively influences the cultural implications of nationhood. Furthermore, his emphasis on the interplay between culture, religion, and language highlights the ongoing struggle within Kazakhstan to reconcile “civic”

nationalism with “ethnocultural” nationalism. This tension underscores the complex dynamics at play in defining Kazakhstani identity and navigating the diverse cultural landscape of the nation. Similarly, the former chief mufti echoed Aryn’s sentiments, albeit from a more theological standpoint. By emphasizing Islam’s teachings on patriotism and respect for fellow citizens, he underscored the religion’s potential contribution to Kazakhstan’s national strength. He asserted, “One of the core teachings of Islam is to love our *motherland* and respect fellow citizens. Given that fact, Islam can contribute towards making Kazakhstan a strong nation (Derbisali, 2017, July 25).” Drawing historical references from the time of Prophet Muhammad, he grounded his argument in Islamic principles, highlighting the compatibility between Islam and patriotism.

The deputy mufti of SAMK, at the Almaty office, echoed the sentiments expressed by the former chief mufti, underscoring the significance of historically-shared cultural elements in the process of nation-building. He reiterated the role of Islam in invoking a sense of historical belonging and nurturing a spirit of unity among all Kazakh citizens. He argued that it is vague to think of a nation-building process while demeaning the role of historical and cultural factors. This viewpoint resonates with Madani’s concept of “composite nationalism,” which promotes the idea of a pluralistic society characterized by patriotism, solidarity, and a collective sense of national identity.

The question of “Islam’s role in identity formation” elicited varied responses, reflecting a spectrum of perspectives. Ongbarbayev (personal communication, July 30, 2017) underscored the intrinsic link between Kazakh ethnicity and Islam, positing that every ethnic Kazakh inherently identifies

as Muslim, with Islam serving as a fundamental aspect of Kazakhstan's national culture. This assertion reinforces the prevalent notion that Kazakh identity is inseparable from Islamic identity, and vice versa. He further emphasized the indispensability of valuing Kazakh history and culture in shaping a Kazakhstani identity. In contrast, Abuov (personal communication, July 30, 2017) presented a more inclusive stance, highlighting Kazakhstan's multi-ethnic composition and cautioning against privileging one ethnic group over others, as it could potentially foster ethnic polarization within the nation. He said, "Kazakhstan is a multi-ethnic country. The idea of *preferring* one ethnic group [read Kazakh] would mean discrimination of the other [read, for example, Russians]. It has the potential to polarize the nation on ethnic lines (Abuov, 2017, July 30)."

Regarding question 6, the prevailing response emerged as "Maybe," indicating the nuanced complexity inherent in the interaction between Islam and nationalist mobilization. Berik Aryn (personal communication, July 12, 2017) offered an insightful perspective, asserting that Islamic revivalism and nationalist mobilization represent distinct processes, requiring meticulous attention due to the potential for disparate agendas under the same banner. Moreover, Aryn suggested that in Kazakhstan's context, Islamic revivalism, viewed as a cultural phenomenon, could synergize with nationalist mobilization efforts, contributing to the nation's strength. This analysis indicates a potential convergence between Islam and nationalist endeavors. Haji Derbisali's (personal communication, July 25, 2017) affirmation of Islam's teachings of peace, tolerance, and brotherhood underscores their essential role in fostering national strength and stability. Despite the varied perspectives among elites, they collectively

recognize the enduring significance of the Islamic factor in the discourse of nation-building. While diverse opinions exist, it is evident that Islam's influence cannot be disregarded outright. This underscores the complex interplay between Islamic values and the shaping of national identity, demonstrating the multifaceted nature of Kazakhstan's sociopolitical landscape.

Berik Aryn's (personal communication, July 12, 2017) response to question number 7, while diplomatically crafted, tacitly acknowledges Islam's influence in Kazakhstan's dealings with other Muslim-majority nations. Aryn's mention of the "thin line of historic Islamicness" suggests a nuanced understanding of the diplomatic strategies involved, reflecting a controlled approach in a state environment. He said, "We are members of OIC (Organization of Islamic Conference) and have diplomatic ties with other Muslim countries including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, UAE, and others. Though it doesn't translate that Islam directs our international but, at least, it provides a sense of connectedness (Aryn, 2017, July 12)." In contrast, Aydar P. Abuov (personal communication, July 18, 2017) takes a firm stance on Kazakhstan's secular identity, emphasizing collaboration with various nation-states without explicit incorporation of Islamic ideology into foreign policy. His remarks underscore the separation of religion from diplomatic affairs.

Haji Derbisali's (Personal communication, July 25, 2017) response provides a different viewpoint, highlighting the practical benefits of Islamic connections in bolstering Kazakhstan's economy, particularly in the investment and export sectors. By citing examples of collaboration with Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Turkey, and Malaysia, Derbisali elucidates the tangible advantages of leveraging Islamic ties for economic development. He

asserted, “Malaysia is guiding our country in *halal* certification projects. Similarly, the Islamic Development Bank, based in Jeddah, is investing in different financial sectors in the country (Derbisali, 2017, July 12).” Derbisali’s explanation offers valuable insight into how Islam contributes to enhancing Kazakhstan’s diplomatic ties with other Muslim nations. This perspective sheds light on Kazakhstan’s diplomatic strategy, which I characterize as “soft manipulation.” In this approach, diplomatic agreements do not explicitly reference Islam but rather leverage its historical and emotional significance to foster connections. Islam serves as a subtle yet influential factor in facilitating diplomatic exchanges, acting as a “soft-medium” that underpins cooperation and collaboration between Kazakhstan and other Muslim countries. This analysis highlights the strategic utilization of cultural and historical ties to advance Kazakhstan’s diplomatic agenda, showcasing the nuanced interplay between religion, diplomacy, and national interests.

Surprisingly, question 8 yielded intriguing findings, indicating a near-consensus on the compatibility of Islam and secular democracy in Kazakhstan. However, it’s valuable to highlight the nuanced perspectives that emerged. In Berik Aryn’s assertion, “Kazakhstani Muslims follow *Hanafi* Islam. It accommodates our traditions and assimilates our values. Our Islamic tradition is bestowed with a great *Sufi* visionary, *pir-i-Turkistan* (spiritual master of Turkistan), Khoja Ahmad Yassawi. We don’t see any disagreement between Islam and the secular objectives of the country (Aryn, 2017, July 12).” Similarly, Haji Derbisali (personal communication, July 25, 2017) concurred with Aryn’s perspective, asserting that Islam prioritizes qualities such as faithfulness, quality of life, education, and social development, which are consistent with the broader

objectives of secular governance. He clarified that establishing an Islamic state (*dawlah al-Islamiyah*) is not a divine mandate and emphasized the compatibility of Islam's higher objectives or *maqasid al-'ala*" of *Shari'ah* (Islamic law) with Kazakhstan's secular principles. I will refrain from discussing the responses of other religious elites as they largely echo similar sentiments. The prevailing consensus indicates an "accommodative model" of Islam, demonstrating its capacity to coexist, operate, and evolve within the constraints of secular governance. This social reality suggests that Islam in Kazakhstan can adapt to and thrive within a secular framework, indicating a harmonious relationship between religious and state institutions. Yerkin E. Ongbarbayev and Aydar P. Abuov have a mixed expression. Ongbarbayev's (personal communication, July 30, 2017) perspective is notably nuanced, emphasizing that while the state recognizes and upholds traditional Islam, it remains tolerant and adaptable to secular principles. However, he also underscores the importance of state vigilance against the potential threat of radicalization. He believes that deviated sects such as *Wahhabism*, *Al-Qaedaism*, and organizations like ISIS can be checked and eliminated, if the state works in coordination with SAMK and makes it more sophisticated and accessible.

Examining the responses to the final question suggests that "political Islam" is anticipated to have minimal influence on Kazakhstan's political landscape in the foreseeable future. Notably, religious elites express a more stringent stance against any form of Islamic involvement in politics compared to their secular counterparts. Haji Derbisali (personal communication, July 25, 2017) emphasizes the necessity of refraining from religious participation in electoral politics for Kazakhstan's stability, citing concerns about the distortion of Islamic messages by religion-based political parties through

manipulation and maneuvering. Similarly, the *imam* of Hazrat Sultan Mosque (personal communication, June 17, 2017) criticizes the failed model “*politicization*” of Islam in countries like Afghanistan, Egypt, and Pakistan, where the blending of religious function and the vote-box has resulted in undesirable outcomes. In the administrative realm, Berik Aryn (personal communication, July 12, 2017) categorically opposes the notion, underscoring the state’s reluctance to engage in such a consequential course of action. He asserted, “State has the least political will to allow any form of religious politics”. He further argues that allowing religious parties to partake in electoral processes and pursue political power would result in dysfunctionality and the disruption of communal cohesion, asserting that such a scenario would be unacceptable. This firm and united stance among elites not only underscores the prevailing reluctance toward “religious politics” in Kazakhstan but also serves as a rationale for legislative restrictions on political entities linked with religious sects or movements.

F. Conclusion

In conclusion, the article offers a nuanced understanding of the relationship between Islam and nationalist mobilization in Kazakhstan, highlighting the multifaceted strategies employed by the state to leverage religious identity for political and diplomatic purposes. It emphasizes the significance of elite perspectives in shaping narratives of national identity and fostering social cohesion, while also acknowledging the challenges posed by balancing religious values with the imperatives of modern statehood. Moving forward, the conclusion emphasizes the importance of maintaining a balanced approach to religion in nation-building efforts,

advocating for the preservation of cultural heritage while promoting social integration and sustainable development. It underscores the need for continued dialogue and cooperation between state institutions, religious authorities, and civil society actors to navigate the complexities of religious identity in a rapidly changing socio-political landscape. Overall, the conclusion reaffirms the importance of understanding the role of Islam in shaping Kazakhstan's national identity and emphasizes the potential for religion to serve as a unifying force in the nation-building process, provided it is approached with sensitivity, inclusivity, and respect for diversity.

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