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## NEO-TENGRISM MOVEMENTS IN CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES: ISSUES OF REVIVAL

The Tengrist faith is a religious belief system based on the ancient Turkic worldview, harmony with nature, and ancestor worship. This religious belief, which was widespread among the ancient Turkic-speaking peoples, was greatly weakened with the advent of Islam and seemed to disappear in the Turkic world. In the last 10-15 years, however, it has experienced a revival among the Turkic-speaking peoples of the Central Asian, and some former post-Soviet countries. This phenomenon has aroused the interest of scholars. This article examines the reasons for the emergence of neo-Tengrism movements in the Central Asian region, particularly in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and the issues surrounding their revival. This article aims to examine the emergence and dissemination of neo-Tengrism movements in Central Asia, with a specific focus on the regions of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. The spiritual vacuum after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the process of searching for national identity have led to a resurgence of the religious phenomenon in Kazakh society as a whole. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, this phenomenon is reflected in various cultural organizations and public movements. The article analyses the modern interpretations of neo-Tengrism and its manifestations in Central Asia. More specifically, it analyses and compares the phenomena of Tengrism in the states of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The data on the belief in Neo-Tengrism and its spread are analysed. The research mainly uses methods such as scientific analysis, literature review, analytical review. As a result of the research, various forms of neo-Tengrism movements in Central Asian countries were identified and analyzed in terms of their political, religious, and cultural dimensions. The study reveals that this phenomenon warrants investigation not only within the framework of religious studies but also from a political science perspective.

**Keywords:** Central Asia, religion, tengri, neo-tengrism, revival.

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### Орталық Азия мемлекеттеріндегі неотәңіршілдік қозғалыстары: қайта жаңғыру мәселелері

Тәңіршілдік сенімі көне түркі дүниетанымына, табиғатпен үйлесімге және ата-баба культіне негізделген діни сенім жүйесі болып табылады. Ежелгі түркі тілдес халықтардың арасында кең тараған бұл діни сенім, ислам дінінің келуімен түркі әлемінде қатты әлсіреп жойылып кеткендей болатын. Бірақ қазіргі соңғы 10-15 жылда бұрынғы Орта Азия мемлекеттері мен кейбір постсоветтік елдердердегі түркі тілдес халықтар арасында қайта жаңғыру үстінде. Бұл феномен ғалымдардың қызығушылығын арттырған болатын. Бұл мақалада Орталық Азия аймағындағы, әсіресе Қазақстан мен Қырғызстандағы неотәңіршілдік қозғалыстардың пайда болу себептері мен олардың қайта жаңғыру мәселелері қарастырылады. Яғни мақаланың негізгі мақсаты Орталық Азия оның ішінде Қырғызстан мен Қазақстан аймағында таралып жатқан неотәңіршілдік қозғалыстарды зерттеу болып табылады. Кеңес Одағы құлағаннан кейінгі рухани вакуум мен ұлттық болмысты қайта іздеу үрдісі жалпы қазақ қоғамында діни феноменнің жандануына түрткі болды. Қазақстан мен Қырғызстанда бұл құбылыс түрлі мәдени ұйымдар мен қоғамдық қозғалыстар арқылы көрініс табуда. Мақалада неотәңіршілдіктің заманауи интерпретациялары және оның Орталық Азиядағы көріністері талданады. Нақтырақ айтқанда Қазақстан мен Қырғызстан мемлекеттеріндегі тәңіршілдік феномендері зерттеліп, салыстырылады. Неотәңіршілдік сенімі және оның таралуы туралы мәліметтерге талдау жасалынады. Зерттеуде негізінен ғылыми талдау, әдебиеттерге шолу, аналитикалық шолу сынды әдістер қолданылады. Зерттеу нәтижесінде Орталық Азия елдеріндегі неотәңіршілдік қозғалыстардың саяси, діни, мәдени бағыттардағы бірнеше түрі анықталып, талдау жасалды. Бұл тақырып тек дінтанулық тұрғыда ғана емес, саяси тұрғыдан да зерттелуі қажет екендігі анықталып отыр.

**Түйін сөздер:** Орта Азия, дін, тәңір, неотәңіршілдік, қайта жаңғыру.

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### Неотенгрианские движения в странах Центральной Азии: проблемы возрождения

Тенгрианство – это религиозная система верований, основанная на древнетюркском мировоззрении, гармонии с природой и поклонении предкам. Это религиозное верование, широко распространённое среди древних тюркоязычных народов, сильно ослабло с приходом ислама и, казалось, исчезло в тюркском мире. Однако в последние 10–15 лет оно переживает возрождение среди тюркоязычных народов Центральной Азии и некоторых стран бывшего СССР. Это явление вызывает интерес учёных. В данной статье рассматриваются причины возникновения неотенгрианского движения в Центральноазиатском регионе, в частности в Казахстане и Кыргызстане, и проблемы, связанные с их возрождением. Настоящая статья направлена на изучение возникновения и распространения неотенгрианских движений в Центральной Азии с особым акцентом на регионы Кыргызстана и Казахстана. Духовный вакуум после распада Советского Союза и процесс поиска национальной идентичности привели к возрождению этого религиозного феномена в казахском обществе в целом. В Казахстане и Кыргызстане это явление находит отражение в различных культурных организациях и общественных движениях. В статье анализируются современные интерпретации неотенгрианства и его проявления в Центральной Азии. В частности, анализируется и сравнивается феномен тенгрианства в Казахстане и Кыргызстане. Анализируются данные о вере в неотенгрианство и его распространении. В исследовании используются преимущественно такие методы, как научный анализ, обзор литературы, аналитический обзор. В результате исследования были выявлены и проанализированы различные формы неотенгрианских движений в странах Центральной Азии с учётом их политических, религиозных и культурных аспектов. Исследование показывает, что данное явление требует изучения не только в рамках религиоведения, но и с позиций политической науки.

**Ключевые слова:** Центральная Азия, религия, тенгрианство, неотенгрианство, возрождение.

#### Introduction

Tengrism is one of the ancient belief systems of the Turkic peoples. Although it belongs to the early spiritual traditions, traces of Tengrism can still be observed in the customs and cultural practices of modern Turkic communities. Islam, which forms the basis of the religious spirituality of the Turkic peoples, has historically adopted some elements of Tengrism (Ajupov, 2012). Some aspects that do not contradict Islam are found among the Turkic peoples as traditions or superstitions. Therefore, there are some differences between Islam in the Arab countries and Islam in the Turkic peoples. However, it is worth noting that Tengrism largely disappeared after the Turkic peoples adopted Islam.

Tengri emerged as the principal creator deity of the Turkic steppe around the end of the 2nd millennium BCE and the beginning of the 1st millennium BCE. Its conceptual formation coincides with the period when Turkic and Mongolic tribes were developing their national identities and establishing steppe empires in the V–VI centuries CE. The original form of the word used to refer to “sky” or the divine-Chenli by the Huns, Tian by the Chinese, and Dingir by the Sumerians – was identified by French scholar Jean-Paul Roux under the general term

*Tengrism*. The word *Tengri* is interpreted to mean “sky,” “god,” “creator of the world,” and “sovereign” (Apezova, 2023).

The independence of Turkic states following the collapse of the Soviet Union created an opportunity to revisit various historical and cultural issues. A spiritual and cultural revival is unfolding among Turkic peoples through the rediscovery of their true history and indigenous traditions. In this context, Central Asian states have sought to redefine national and religious identities. In particular, some intellectuals in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have turned to the Tengriist worldview as a means of cultural reorientation. About 10–15 years after these academic initiatives began, new Tengriist groups started to emerge and gain visibility in public life.

At the same time, some social media users claiming to follow Tengrism have been linked to efforts aimed at destabilizing interfaith harmony. This growing concern has drawn the attention of experts from the Committee on Religious Affairs under the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Many scholars now refer to these contemporary movements as neo-Tengrism. Consequently, the need to clarify and explain the concept of *Tengri* from a scientific and objective standpoint is gaining urgency.

Neo-Tengrism and shamanic practices in regions such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Karakalpakstan, Tatarstan, and Mongolia often manifest in a syncretic form, incorporating elements of Islamic belief. In contrast, Tengrism as practiced in Buryatia, Altai, and Tuva tends to combine with Lamaism (Tibetan Buddhism). This revival has attracted scholarly interest across disciplines such as religious studies, history, and Turkology. The phenomenon of Neo-Tengrism has therefore become increasingly relevant in the post-Soviet context. This topic will be further explored in the main body of this paper.

### **Justification of the choice of articles and goals and objectives**

In the period following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian states experienced a spiritual search, a return to religion and tradition and an interest in their national roots. These conditions created a favourable social environment for the revival and rise of neo-Tengrism movements. In addition, the age of globalisation and the rapid spread and development of the information space are leading to a reinterpretation of traditional beliefs.

The study of this topic allows us to understand important scientific, theoretical and practical issues, such as the question of religious identity in the Central Asian states, the question of the emergence of political religious movements. Therefore, the topic “Neo-Tengrism Movements in the Central Asian Countries: Issues of Revival” was chosen as one of the research directions relevant and noteworthy today.

One of the aims of the study is to comprehensively analyse the causes of the emergence and revival of neo-Tengrism movements in Central Asia, especially in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and to identify their religious, cultural and socio-political aspects. In addition, the role and influence of this phenomenon in modern society will be analysed comparatively.

### **Scientific research methodology**

To explore the revival of Tengrism in the Central Asian states, a combination of research methods was employed, encompassing historical, cultural, anthropological, and phenomenological approaches. These methodologies were chosen for their relevance to the interdisciplinary nature of the topic.

The historical-chronological method was used to systematically examine the development of Tengriist traditions in Central Asia, with particular attention to the periods of revival following national

independence. The study also relied heavily on scientific analysis as a primary method for interpreting data and evaluating academic discourse.

An analytical review of the literature was conducted to identify and synthesize existing research related to Tengrism. This included scholarly articles, historical texts, and contemporary sources discussing both traditional Tengriist practices and their modern reinterpretations.

Additionally, comparative analysis was applied to examine the similarities and differences in Neo-Tengriist movements across Central Asian countries-specifically Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. This method enabled a deeper understanding of the unique historical, cultural, and religious influences shaping the re-emergence of Tengrism in each national context.

### **Results and discussion**

The origins of Tengrism are linked to the Turkic-Mongolic peoples who formed nomadic states in the 3rd century BCE across the territories of present-day Central Asia (Kradin, 2020). The first effort to unify various spiritual beliefs and practices into a single religious system centered on the worship of the sky deity known as Tengri. The name of the belief system itself derives from this term.

Worship of the sky god was not exclusive to Turkic peoples; similar practices were also common among Iranian-speaking populations and were especially prominent among the peoples of Tibet and China. References to the celestial deity Tengri and the concept of the Blue Sky are found in a wide array of historical sources, including Chinese, Iranian, Arab, Tibetan, Manchurian, and ancient Turkic texts (Ulanov, 2022).

There are several divergent opinions among scholars regarding the belief system of Tengrism. For instance, some researchers describe Tengrism as a monotheistic religion, equating the term *Tengri* with *God* and emphasizing the singular worship of a supreme deity. Others, however, argue that Tengrism is better understood as a syncretic system, integrating elements of shamanism, animism, and the worship of celestial bodies or gods associated with the sky. These contrasting interpretations reflect the complexity and evolving understanding of Tengrism as both a religious and cultural phenomenon.

Some early Turkish-language texts contain references to the concept of *Tengri*, where the word is clearly used as a synonym for “god.” (Houtsma M 1924). The Orkhon inscriptions-one of the earliest sources of Turkic writing-played a significant role

in the rediscovery of this term. After these inscriptions were deciphered in the 19th century by the Danish historian Wilhelm Thomsen (1842–1927), who identified the Turkic runic script, the concept of *Tengri* began to appear in Russian academic literature.

With the support of the Russian Tsarist government, scholars such as Dorzhi Banzarov (1822–1855) and Shokan Ualikhanov (1835–1865) conducted expeditions and initiated some of the first academic studies on Tengrism. During the Soviet era, however, research on Tengrism was limited and often suppressed due to ideological restrictions. It was only after the independence of post-Soviet Central Asian states—particularly Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Karakalpakstan—that interest in Tengrism re-emerged, closely tied to questions of national identity and cultural heritage.

One notable intellectual figure in this context is Olzhas Suleimenov (b. 1936), a prominent Kazakh writer and scholar, who referenced the term *Tengri* in his influential book «*AZIYA*». In this work, Suleimenov highlights Tengrism as the oldest religion and philosophical doctrine in the world. (Suleimenov, 2011).

Despite the renewed interest, there remains limited historical evidence of Kazakhs or Kyrgyz actively practicing Tengrism during the Tsarist period. The concept became more clearly articulated only in the post-independence era. It is difficult to say with certainty why Tengrism has resurged in Central Asia since independence. There are different points of view on this revival. One of them tries to explain the resurgence of Tengrism by linking it to the archetypal theory of the famous psychologist K.G. Jung (Jung, 2019). These scientists, include A. Ryskiyeva, A. Kuranbek, B. Atash, among others. These scientists argue that Tengrism has a place in the collective unconscious of the Kazakh worldview and is reflected in the works of artists (Ryskiyeva, 2022).

In recent years, academic interest in Tengrism has grown considerably, with researchers examining the phenomenon from various disciplinary angles. Among the notable scholars in this field are: N.G. Ayupov, S.Sh. Ayazbekova, T.S. Zhumaganbetov, A.A. Kodar, A.N. Sydykova, H. Tsookhuu, H. Güngör, N.V. Abaeva, B.A. Bicheeva, A.G. Kukeyeva, Y.I. Drobysheva, I.S. Urbanaeva, among others (Abayev, 2015).

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the phenomenon of Tengrism began to re-emerge not only in the Central Asian republics but also in several autonomous regions of the Russian Federation. These include Buryatia, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan,

and among the Sakha (Yakut) peoples. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in particular, the movement has developed through the efforts of intellectual and cultural elites seeking to revive pre-Islamic and pre-Soviet traditions.

These intellectual groups began to publish journals and periodicals to express their views on Tengrism and its role in shaping national identity. For example, in Kazakhstan, the quarterly journal *Rukh-Miras*, founded in 2004 by the orientalist Murat Auezov, published several articles on Tengrism, contributing to academic and public discourse in the field of cultural studies.

Similarly, in Tatarstan, the newspaper “Beznen-Yul” (“Our Way”) addressed comparable themes related to cultural and religious revival. The Tatar Tengriists also combined the development of a national consciousness with the revitalisation of Tengrism. To this end, they organise various cultural events. For example, every June since 2000, the “Tan Batyr” camp has been organised in the village of Kamayevo in Tatarstan for Tengrists from Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and other countries. In 2014, some Tatar intellectuals wrote to the President of Tatarstan, Rustam Minnikhanov, asking him to establish a Tengriist holy site called Tenre-Yort in Kazan. In their appeal, they wrote: “Tenre-Yort should be located in the center of Kazan so that Tenre and the spirits of the ancestors know how they relate to them, its size should correspond to its purpose” (Maltsev, 2015). In addition, representatives of this movement regularly publish their views on the website “tengriantvo.narod.ru” (Mavrov, 2017). Similar processes have also been observed in Kyrgyzstan. In the years following independence, some representatives of the intelligentsia, in particular historians and cultural scientists, philosophers, and writers, endeavoured to revive Tengrism from a scientific perspective.

Over the past 10–15 years, interest in the topic of “Tengrism” has increased significantly in the territory of the post-Soviet states, and the religious aspects of this religion have begun to develop significantly in comparison with the scientific and historical situation. Religious rituals have begun to be rationalised. This means that neo-directions of shamanism and shamanic ideas from earlier centuries are reviving.

In the Central Asian states, of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Karakalpakstan, Tatarstan, Mongolia, etc., neo-Tengrism and shamanism manifest themselves in a syncretic (combined, mixed) form with the principles of the Islamic religion, while in the countries of Buryatia, Altai, and Tuba, Tengrism manifests it-



self in a syncretic form in connection with Lamaism. In addition, the influence of new political forces on the neo-Tengrist groups was discussed in detail.

#### *Tengrism in Kyrgyzstan*

The Tengrism movements in Kyrgyzstan entered the political arena after independence with the support of Dastan Sarygulov, who was Secretary General under President Askar Akayev, and with financial support from the Soros Foundation. Sarygulov continued his political activities as governor of the Talas region after Kyrgyzstan's independence. The Talas region was one of the most developed regions of "Tengrism" in Kyrgyzstan. It was therefore easier to revive the belief in Tengrism in this region than in other regions.

Sarygulov became famous in the early 2000s for publishing several booklets on "Tengrism" with the help of the philosopher Ch. Omuraliev, who wrote the book "Tengrism: A Guide to the Sound of National Philosophy" (Laruelle, 2007). Ch. Omuraliev, who has written several scientific works on the subject, also wrote "Tengrism. State-Community", one of the most valuable works for Tengrists (Omuraliev, 2012).

In Kyrgyzstan, this movement went through the first stage of institutionalization with the establishment of the Association for the Preservation of National Heritage "Tengri-Ordo". In 2003, D. Sarygulov's "Tengri-Ordo" association organised an international symposium to promote Tengrism, published an annual "Tengrism" calendar, and proudly announced the presence of many followers. The ideological basis of this movement, which was formed by the book "Tengrism", aimed to form a national identity of the Kyrgyz on the basis of the epic "Manas". In their opinion, Tengrism was a unifying cultural element of the Turkic empires that had emerged in the Asian steppes in the VII-VIII centuries.

A. Akayev repeatedly mentioned Tengrism as the indigenous religion of the Kyrgyz. During his visit to Khakassia in 2002, he even said that visiting the Yenisei and the rune stelae was a pilgrimage to a holy place, like a pilgrimage to Mecca (Akayev, 2019). There are also attempts to institutionalise Tengrism in the Kyrgyz public sphere. For several years, Tengrists have sought to register their organizations with the State Commission for Religious Affairs. However, the Kyrgyz authorities have consistently refused, citing the need to "avoid jeopardising inter-religious harmony in the republic and to preserve religious stability." Some observers speculate that this decision stems from "Muslim dissatisfaction with the legalization of paganism" (Malcev, 2015). Nevertheless,

Tengrists in Kyrgyzstan-whose number exceeds 5,000-believe that the revitalization of Tengrism will contribute to strengthening the national identity of the Kyrgyz people.

After the fall of A. Akayev and D. Sarygulov, who tried to strengthen Tengrism through the "Tengri Ordo" or "Rukh Ordo" centers established in the north of Kyrgyzstan, this movement began to weaken. Today, this movement, known as "Kyrgyzchylyk", is considered a marginal idea among intellectuals. However, there is information that former Tengrists have founded a political party called "Mekenim Kyrgyzstan" and are gathering under the umbrella of this party.

The Kyrgyz religious organisation *Tengrishylik* (led by Anarbek Usupbayev and Arslanbek Maleev), which seeks to revive Tengrism, has been attempting to obtain official registration since 2013. However, the application was rejected on the grounds that the principles and teachings of the proposed faith are too similar to Islam and could create misunderstandings among believers. Meanwhile, since 2007, there has been a growing public movement in Kyrgyzstan aimed at reviving Tengrist rituals and prayers. (Malikov, 2009).

#### *Tengrism in Kazakhstan*

As previously noted, the revival of Tengrism in Kazakhstan originated within the intellectual sphere. In the years following independence, historians, cultural scholars, literary critics, philosophers, and Turkologists sought to reconstruct the history of this faith through academic journals and numerous publications. Their efforts aimed at establishing a scientific foundation and at linking national identity with religious heritage.

Although contemporary neo-Tengrist groups draw upon the work of these scholars, they often pursue different objectives. Islamophobic attitudes are frequently evident within these movements, particularly in their social media activity. Moreover, modern neo-Tengrism is widely regarded as a politicised phenomenon, a perception that continues to spark debate within society.

Recent attempts by neo-Tengrist groups to obtain official registration as religious organisations have further intensified discussions among religious scholars. Since legal recognition requires a system of rituals and ceremonies, these groups have begun experimenting with new forms of religious practice. However, their aspirations remain unrealized, as internal divisions and lack of cohesion have hindered the establishment of a unified movement.

Tengrism in contemporary Kazakhstan can broadly be categorized into several distinct groups:

Representatives of the first group. Representatives of the group that describes itself as defenders of the “Kazakh worldview” and the “Kazakh tradition” orientate themselves on the myths and legends that are widespread among the people. We cannot say that the representatives of this group pose serious problems in society or cause interfaith conflicts. Rather, they associate certain Kazakh customs and traditions, which are gradually being forgotten, with Tengrism. Compared to other groups, they are not particularly active in social life.

Representatives of the second group. Political-racist direction, called Tengriists or adherents of the Kazakh worldview. In general, all Tengriist movements in Kazakh society trace their origins to the traditional Kazakh worldview. Since they lack established religious dogmas, sacred texts, and authoritative literature, adherents sometimes create new works to fill this gap. One such work followed by representatives of the second group is *The Book of Truth* by T.A. Beisenbinov, published in 2006 (Beisenbinov, 2006). Members of this group seek to explain the philosophy of Tengrism and to clarify its rituals and ceremonies on the basis of this text. For example, according to the book “Tengri” is not the name of God, but adheres to the principles of natural philosophy: “Tengri is protein in the body”, “Kazakh tribes are acids and organic substances in protein”, “The spirits of ancestors are in the human body” (Beisenbinov, 2006: 237). However, other neo-Tengrist groups and researchers of the Tengrist worldview do not agree with the position taken by this group that “Tengri” is not the name of God. This is because Shokan Ualikhanov, states in his article “Tengri (God)” that Tengrism arose on the basis of customs and principles, the belief in spirits and ghosts. On the one hand, he introduces God as God and says that theism is a “monotheistic belief in God”, and on the other hand, he argues that the concepts of “spirits, souls, fairies, divas, and evil shamanic spirits” had not yet disappeared in his time (Abylov, 2023). According to the above-mentioned neo-theism groups, the position that “God is not the name of God” is “directed against theism” and “the slogan of groups that want to destroy theism.”

Sacred cults: Ak (white) – sacred cell. Aruak – Aru cell. Aruak – pregnancy regulator. Only «AK – ARUAK» knows the answer to all questions that arise in the living world. God himself, who created Ak – Aruak as his own. Tan-Ir – body protein. Tan-Ir – immunity protein. However, other neo-theistic groups do not agree with the «Aruak – cell» position held by this group and consider such a belief as a «non-theistic» concept. According to the beliefs of other

neo-theistic groups described above, they believe that “Aruak is not a cell. Aruak is an ancestor who has already passed away» (Beisenbinov, 2006: 237). On this basis, there are differences of opinion between representatives of the neo-theistic direction.

Terminology: Mysyman – a person who firmly believes in the Tan-ir faith. Prayer – a blessing for the time. Fasting – sharing the success gained with others. Fasting – a diet (Beisenbinov, 2006: 342). Takarat – going into nature, bathing, basking in the sun. Bata – organic chromosomes. Alty Alash-Kuyymchak, Takyl, Kundyk, Kokey, Mandai, Tobe. Alty Alash – a Hindu style form of worship, seated in the form of meditation (Beisenbinov, 2006: 367).

As we have seen, the terminology of this direction is presented in a syncretic manner with the concepts of the Islamic faith. In addition to Islam, one can also find concepts and rituals in neo-theistic movements that are very similar to those of other religions.

Syncretic types of worship: Alty Alash – a form of worship that expresses a deep immersion of consciousness in one’s own content, similar to Hindu meditation.

Om-formed from the syllables om and in, serves as a link. Om is the highest being, the universal spirit in the understanding of Hinduism. Om is the first path to the god Savitar (Beisenbinov, 2006).

Another “occultism” propagated by this Tengri movement is called “rebirth” (reincarnation). However, there is a clear difference between “rebirth” and reincarnation. Reincarnation means the transfer of souls from body to body (no matter which one). “Rebirth” in Neo-Tengrists is the rebirth of an ancestor into his own generation (the concept of becoming a parent to your own ancestor again).

*Representatives of the third group.* A group of citizens who call themselves “agnostic Tengriists” and “atheist Tengriists”. Some active members of this group are known for denouncing Islam as a phenomenon that threatens humanity, discriminating against Muslim citizens, presenting religion and science as a contradiction, and disseminating information that describes religion as an obstacle to social development. Members of this group are very active on social media. The results of expert monitoring of social media revealed such Islamophobic signs.

The main work of the group’s representatives was “The Great Paradox, or Two Handwritings in the Quran” (Samir Aleskerov), which was written to criticize the verses of the Quran. This work contains information about the connection between the verses of the Quran and terrorist events that have taken place in the world.

It is clear that one of the main reasons they call themselves “atheists” is their hatred of “religions”. As to why they call themselves “Tengrists”, they explain: “Every nation has its own tradition, and the Kazakh tradition is Tengrism. Tengrism means nationalism.” Although the representatives of this current call themselves “atheists”, they do not know much about the principles of atheism.

Several of the above-mentioned neo-theistic groups are active in Kazakh society. The activity of these groups requires further research on this topic.

#### *Politicised neo-Tengrism*

The historian and Islamic scholar Muhan Isakhan claims that modern neo-theism is an “artificial phenomenon” and that “theism is a political project” (Bulan, 2025). Muhan Isakhan argues that theism was artificially created during the Russian Empire and was intended to be propagated in the Kazakh steppe (Isakhan, 2023). The Central Asia researcher Marlène Laruelle claims that the modern Tengrists have a politicized ideology and that there are differences between the Tatars in Russia and the Tengrists in Central Asia (Marlène Laruelle, 2007). The political orientation of the neo-Tengrist groups in the Central Asian states was first observed in the Kyrgyz Republic. As mentioned above, the Tengri movement in Kyrgyzstan was initiated by Dastan Sarygulov, who was Secretary General of President Askar Akayev.

At that time, the first phase of Islamophobic upheavals in the world was underway. The first Central Asian conflicts began to take root in Kyrgyzstan. Local seers and occult-mystical soothsayers, “seekers who claim to be saints”, “saints”, “ancestors” and other soothsayers spread the information that “the spirit of Manas was very angry” about political decisions, and that it was necessary local divination groups spread messages about the leasing of Manas airport to foreigners, the changing world and steps in politics, and the propagation of the commandments of Manas (through occult communication) was widely disseminated. They reported that the spirit of Manas was unhappy with the arrival of the US army. In addition, the first wave of groups propagating “theism” emerged, claiming that the Manas poem was a pre-Islamic creation and that Manas did not belong to the Islamic diviners. However, the widespread spread of Islam in society and the emergence of some non-traditional Islamic currents as well as the weight of Islamophobia in world politics, have influenced the new Tengri movement to take an Islamophobic direction.

In order to protect and promote the Tengriist faith, a number of works and tracts were published.

Among the most active Kyrgyz figures in this movement were Anarbek Usupbayev, leader of the *Manas Horde* movement, and Dastan Sarygulov, Secretary General of the Kyrgyz Republic and later president of the *Tengir Horde* Foundation. At present, Usupbayev’s works *The Great Mission of Tengrism* and *Ari El*, written to advance the new Tengriist faith, are widely disseminated.

As a result, several currents of Tengrism-traditionalist, nationalist, and new religious movements emerged in the Kyrgyz Republic. These groups split into different directions, including the *Manas Horde* (a cultic movement glorifying the spirit of Manas), the *Tengir Horde*, and various circles of Tengriists who promote the idea of eliminating negative energy through the power of the sun.

These “new Tengriist” groups have become particularly known for their sharp criticism of Islamic believers, the spread of misinformation about Islam, and their attempts to portray themselves as defenders of an authentic Kyrgyz national faith. Such practices, however, have contributed to interfaith tensions and conflicts within Kyrgyz society.

The Islamophobic neo-theist political movement, which emerged in neighboring Kyrgyzstan, as a result of various religious disputes in society, became popular not only in Kyrgyz society, but also in Kazakhstan. Today, information that has a negative impact on the political stability of the Republic of Kazakhstan, interfaith relations based on the principle of tolerance, and social stability is widespread on the Internet. It is known that such actions are often carried out by external and internal political forces.

The propagandists of the Islamophobic group were well-known bloggers, specialized websites and groups presenting themselves as “Kazakh atheist-theists”, “Kazakh agnostic-theists”, etc. These groups used the name “theists”. These groups used the name “theists” only as a disguise. The group of “theists” was thus used as a tool for political games.

Today, there is a resurgence of “Islamophobic” attacks on the internet. This phenomenon threatens stability in the countries of Central Asia. After all, the “color” revolutions and conflicts in North Africa, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, etc. were preceded by information attacks accusing clerics and government officials. Special attacks against clergymen were even organized in advance. Therefore, controlling the information space is of utmost importance.

## **Conclusion**

Today, in Central Asia (particularly in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan), as well as in Russia and other

countries, active efforts are being made to revive and legalize the Tengriist faith (also known as Tengri, Tangra, Takhar, Teiri, Bugi, or Tengri). Some scholars link this process to the revival of national and ethnic self-consciousness that began after the collapse of the USSR, while others associate it with global challenges of the present era, including a deep crisis of traditional spiritual values and the rise of radical forms of religious extremism.

At the same time, political groups may exploit “neo-Tengriist” movements as instruments for inciting divisions, religious conflicts, and interfaith hostility towards representatives of Orthodoxy, Islam, and Buddhism, which remain widespread in the post-Soviet region. Such tensions and conflicts inevitably have a negative impact on social stability.

It is important to emphasize the significant differences between modern neo-Tengriist movements and the ancient Tengriist tradition. While the latter was rooted in harmony with nature, spiritual balance, and the preservation of ancestral customs, con-

temporary neo-Tengrism often appears as a political and ideological construct. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in particular, certain neo-Tengriist groups present their worldview as a marker of national identity and post-Soviet cultural independence. Yet, some of these movements openly criticize Islam and, in some cases, promote Islamophobic rhetoric. Such tendencies pose a potential threat to religious tolerance and interconfessional balance in society.

Therefore, the phenomenon of neo-Tengrism should be examined not only as an ethno-cultural revival but also as a political and social factor with implications for interfaith relations and societal stability.

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