

How to Pray in Kazakhstan: *The Fortress of the Muslim* and Its Readers

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Abstract: In this article, I describe the ways that Islamic presses associated with the piety movement attempt to help Kazakhs develop virtues such as patience and faith by publishing a book of supplications called *The Fortress of the Muslim*. Members of the piety movement attempt to follow these presses' instructions and often report that they have become more patient or mindful of God. Members of Ata Zholy, another Islamic movement in Kazakhstan, learn a different ideology of supplication on pilgrimages where they seek God's help in conjunction with the blessings of saints. Members of Ata Zholy use *The Fortress of the Muslim* in heterogeneous ways, many of which contradict the ideology of the piety movement. The various tactics that members of Ata Zholy use while reading *The Fortress* illustrate the ways that readers unassociated with the piety movement in Kazakhstan use the products of a dominant Islamic movement for their own purposes.

Keywords: Islam, prayer, reading, Kazakhstan, de Certeau

Introduction: two ways of asking God for help

I begin this article with two interlocutors' stories of the role that *The Fortress of the Muslim*, a book of supplicatory prayers taken from the Qur'an and words of the Prophet, has played in their lives. I met the first interlocutor, a bearded 55 year-old man named Usen, at a smoggy bazaar near the Almaty bus station in the fall of 2008. I initially approached him to buy some walnuts and dried apricots. After making my purchase, Usen asked me what I was doing in Kazakhstan, and I told him about my interest in Islamic literature. After our initial meeting, we often spoke about the books he was reading and how he had come to be more interested in Islam.

An irreligious family raised Usen during the Soviet era. Before 2007, he did not pray five times a day; by his own description, he had not been a pious, God-fearing (*taqua*) man. After his son began attending Friday prayers at the Almaty Central Mosque, Usen started reading Islamic literature and going to Friday prayers. He now prays five times a day, fasts every year during Ramadan, and reads a fair amount of Islamic literature. Although he attended study groups focused on daily prayer and Islamic ethics in the past, he no longer goes to study groups because he does not have time to do so.

Usen bought *The Fortress of the Muslim* (in Kazakh: *Musylman Qorghany*; hereafter, *The Fortress*), on the advice of the imam at the mosque he attended on Fridays, who told him that the book contained more "pure" supplications than any other book and would help him become more mindful of God. He mentioned two ways that the book had helped him to become more pious. Most importantly, he could carry the book with him and read supplications throughout the day.

It's like this. When I am fasting I can find the supplication for breaking the fast. If I forget I can quickly open the book and read the page which says "Zahabaz-zama-u uab-tal-latil-'uruq ua sabatal-azhru in sha-allah" (The thirst is gone, the veins are moistened, and if God wills, His reward will be written for us). If you can't remember a supplication, then you can find it in [*The Fortress*]. Or the

supplication for “Relying on God when Satan attempts to lead children astray.” What we call Satan walks among us, [so we read]: “*ua zikhumma bi kulaimati latikh kammati bin kulli shaitani ua kammatin ua min kulli ghainin lammakh*” is said. This means “I ask God to keep you safe from all devils and all kinds of harmful people and those with the evil eye.”

Usen explained that each supplication reminds him of a different facet of God, who alone can keep Muslims safe from Satan, devils, and the evil eye, and who alone sustains Muslims through gifts of food, water, and shelter. Much like Tanya Luhrmann’s (2004) evangelical Christian interlocutors, who train themselves to recognize different bodily states as the presence of God in their lives, Usen reads supplications from *The Fortress* to train himself to recognize his dependence on an omnipotent God throughout the day.

Usen has also memorized several supplications in Arabic. He told me that he reads or recites at least 20 supplications every day, and specifically attempts to recite supplications in the morning and at night: “I usually say one of these supplications [pointing to the section in *The Fortress* on supplications for morning and night] 10 times in the morning or 10 times at night, or I say these supplications [pointing to the section on repeating God’s names] 100 times with my prayer beads.” Usen stated that his frequent recitation of memorized supplications helped him to “keep God in [his] thoughts and increase [his] servitude (*qulshylyq*), patience (*sabyr*), and faith (*iman*).”



These prayers have made a palpable difference in Usen’s life. I often walked by Usen at the bazaar and saw him sitting on an old wooden stool in his rusted bazaar stall, reading *The Fortress* or repeating supplications he had memorized from *The Fortress*. He usually inquired about my well-being, asking if I needed help finding other Muslims to interview about Islamic literature or suggesting books for me to read. If I mentioned a frustration or difficulty, Usen would tell me that I should convert to Islam, perform the daily prayers, and read supplications,

which would ease the burdens of my life and help me become patient. Usen told me that if I read supplications, “nothing will touch you. If you have to go from Almaty to Shymkent and back, you just sit on the bus, and if you say a supplication, you will feel that you will go safely. God protects faithful people.” For Usen, saying supplications not only results in a more faithful and patient self, but also a feeling of “lightness” and safety because God protects him as a faithful person.¹

The second interlocutor is Osken, a 50 year-old man who has been on several pilgrimages with a new Islamic movement called Ata Zholy. I met him on one of these pilgrimages to the “Five Forefathers” (*bes ata*), a group of five shrines near Almaty dedicated to Kazakh heroes and saints. He comes from a family he described as “traditional,” and his parents and grandparents taught him about Kazakh culture and morality. He did not formally pray five times a day or fast during Ramadan, but he went on pilgrimages with Ata Zholy a few times a year, usually when he or other members of his family were experiencing hardship, such as a difficult time at work or an illness. His wife and children accompanied him on each pilgrimage. On our first pilgrimage together, Osken and his family were traveling to the Five Forefathers to ask for a cure for his mother’s stomach illness. At one of the shrines, situated in an idyllic field in the shadow of the Tien Shan Mountains, he purchased *The Fortress* after a bookseller told him that there were several powerful supplications (*kushti dughalar*) in the book. Osken immediately looked up a supplication for sickness and found this: "Place your hand on the part of your body that hurts and say 'Bismillah,' or 'in God's Name' three times. Then say the following seven times: 'I seek refuge in Allah and in His Power from evil and fear'" (al-Qahtani 2004: 210). He vowed to say this supplication with his mother when he returned home, and the bookseller stated that this supplication would be particularly effective because the saint of the shrine would also bless his mother.

Osken went home after the pilgrimage and recited with his wife, two sons, and daughter for his mother. His mother recovered from the stomach illness, which convinced Osken of the power of supplications from *The Fortress*. Following his mother's recovery, however, Osken did not read more supplications from *The Fortress* because "these are powerful words. You should not use them lightly." Osken only read the supplication again when his mother fell ill again a few months later. In an exact reversal of the daily supplicatory practice of Usen, Osken advocated infrequent supplication because of the power of the supplications in *The Fortress*.

This article seeks to explain why these two men used *The Fortress* to ask God for help in such different ways. After a short section on methodology, this article will first examine how and why Islamic presses publish *The Fortress* in Kazakhstan. It will then provide context to the ways Usen and Osken read *The Fortress*, discussing how members of the piety movement – like Usen – and members of Ata Zholy – like Osken – read the supplications in the book. Members of both groups recognize the spiritual power of the words in *The Fortress*. The difference lies in how the effects of this spiritual power are understood. Members of the piety movement see the Prophet’s words as uniquely able to help them to develop virtues that make God more likely to help them, while members of Ata Zholy see the Prophet’s words more likely to convince God to grant their requests. My broader goal is to illustrate how powerful institutions in Kazakhstan are able to produce Islamic media, and what Kazakhs do with these media.

Methodology

Fifteen months of fieldwork, conducted between 2007 and 2010 in Almaty and southern Kazakhstan, provide the data for this article. I focus on two particular groups of readers from my research for this article: members of two study groups run by the piety movement and members of an Ata Zholy community (*orda*). In addition, I conducted interviews with Kazakhs who are not members of any particular Islamic movement but are interested in Islamic literature, as well as Kazakhs who are uninterested in Islamic literature and Islam. I recorded over 150 interviews with readers from these groups.

In order to understand how members of these groups read Islamic literature, I went to piety movement study groups on Wednesday and Friday nights, attended Friday prayers with members of these study groups, participated in semi-regular “candle” rituals held by the Ata Zholy community, and went on pilgrimages with them. By sitting in on these study groups, pilgrimages, and meetings, I was able to observe the production of particular discourses and practices by the leaders of the groups. I also met with members of these groups informally; I met some interlocutors at cafes to watch World Cup games and joined others at their homes for meals. My informal meetings with members of these groups helped me see their lives outside of formal Islamic experiences and how they integrated reading *The Fortress* into everyday life.

I also interviewed editors and writers at several presses, including Musylman Publishing House (hereafter, Musylman), the Khalifa Altai Charitable Fund (hereafter, KACF), Kokzhiiek, al-Barakat, and Kausar-Sayakhat. One of the presses discussed in this article, Musylman Publishing House, was gracious enough to invite me to sit in their offices and observe the day-to-day operation of their firm. By the end of my research period, I had spent approximately two months in Musylman's offices.

Publishing *The Fortress*

Two presses in Kazakhstan publish *The Fortress*: the KACF and Musylman.² Khalifa Altai, an expatriate Kazakh who is best known for his translation of the Qur'an into Kazakh (Altai 1991), founded the KACF with the help of some of his first students.³ The KACF started as an institution that offered Arabic lessons to Kazakhs but morphed into one of the most popular presses in Kazakhstan, particularly among members of the piety movement. For example, the KACF published 30 of the 171 books owned by the members of one of the study groups I attended, making it the most popular publisher among these members of the piety movement. Qairat Isa, a former newspaper writer and editor, started Musylman in 2003.⁴ Musylman is also a popular press; it published 26 of the 171 books owned by members of the study group mentioned above, making it the second most popular press among these young men. The KACF's edition of *The Fortress* is much more popular, having gone through multiple print runs of 10,000 copies, while Musylman Publishing House has printed several print runs of 1,000 copies.

De Certeau's concepts of strategies and tactics can help clarify the goals and power of the KACF and Musylman. De Certeau defines a strategy as:

the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated. It postulates a place that can be delimited as its own

and serve as the base from which relations with an exteriority composed of targets or threats can be managed. (de Certeau 1984: 35-36)

If we break through the somewhat confusing language, de Certeau is essentially describing a strategy as a practice of (1) an institution with (2) power and (3) goals for transforming society or the natural world outside of the institution. De Certeau's most famous example of a strategy is the way that institutions survey and discipline a city: planning commissions create a grid of streets so they can easily demarcate areas for particular types of traffic or use, issue permits to link land to individuals and function, and levy fines for the improper use of land.⁵ For de Certeau, the grid of streets and sidewalks is the physical manifestation of the management of a city. This grid is meant to control people within it.

The KACF and Musylman publish *The Fortress* as a strategy to impose a metaphorical grid of ethical behavior, or to lock them into a particular type of supplicatory practice. Their power to impose this grid is derived from their possession of financial capital, which enables them to publish Islamic books. This financial capital was initially the result of patronage rather than commercial success. Musylman received funding from a single Kazakh businessman and has expanded due to the success of some of the books published with the aid of this businessman. The businessman who supported Musylman stopped his support after the financial crisis of 2008, and Musylman has struggled to find donors. In some cases, individual patrons donate money so that Musylman can issue a print run of a single book (e.g., Isa et al 2008), but Musylman has struggled without a stable patron. The KACF, however, has more stable funding, and is able to publish *The Fortress* in large quantities and sell it at a low price (200 tenge, \$1.33, in 2010) because of its funding by Gulf Arabs, according to an employee of the charity. Musylman and the KACF hope that a more stable market for Islamic books will develop if they continue publishing. In the market for Islamic books in Kazakhstan, patronage comes before popularity.

The KACF and Musylman are representative of what I call the "piety movement" in Kazakhstan, which is led by a conglomeration of imams and bureaucrats of the Kazakhstani Muftiate, Kazakhs who have studied in the Arab world, and foreign and domestic financial patrons (see also Schwab 2011, 2012). The broad grouping of the Religious Right in America is analogous to my grouping of reformist Muslims in Kazakhstan as "the piety movement." Reformist Muslims, whether identifying as strict Hanafis, Salafis, or something else, generally recognize each other as pious Muslims who share similar lifestyles and goals for transforming Kazakhstani society. If we use the typology of Tariq Ramadan (2004: 24-30), the piety movement is actually an amalgamation of Salafi literalists, Salafi reformists, and scholastic traditionalists. Although the Muftiate advertises its Hanafi (i.e., scholarly traditionalist) credentials, in actuality most imams and writers of the piety movement have been deeply influenced by Salafists. However, most Kazakh Muslims are not easily classified by scholarly typologies such as Ramadan's. Everyday Islamic authority is not as simple as scholars of Islam or Islamic scholars would have us think. As will be seen, members of both the piety movement and Ata Zholy recognize the scholarly learning and authority of a Salafi Saudi writer, even though most members of these two movements would profess to be Hanafis.

Recent survey data helps to identify how large the piety movement is in Kazakhstan. Most members of the piety movement pray five times a day, believe there is only one interpretation of Islam, attend Friday prayers, and see going to shrines as a sin. Approximately four percent of the Muslim population in Kazakhstan prays several times a day (Pew Research Forum 2012: 43) while 10% attend mosque services once a week or more (Pew Research Forum

2012: 46). Eighty percent of Kazakhstani Muslims who pray several times a day believe there is only one correct interpretation of Islam (Pew Research Forum 2012: 86). Twelve percent of Kazakhstani Muslims find visiting shrines unacceptable (Pew Research Forum 2012: 96). Taking these numbers together, approximately five to ten percent of Kazakhstani Muslims can be considered part of the piety movement, including most of those who pray five times a day and who attend Friday prayers at mosques.

As I have detailed in other articles (Schwab 2011: 230, 2012: 189-190), members of the piety movement have virulently anti-shrine attitudes and a pedagogy focused on engagement with the Qur'an and hadiths, and use concepts such as polytheistic sin (*shirk*), the unity of God (*taukhid*), and ignorance (*bilimsizdik*, *zhakhillya*) to make sense of Islamic beliefs and practices. More specifically, members of the piety movement use these concepts to check their own and other Muslims' practices for the possibility that these practices might constitute the worship of something other than God. For example, many Kazakhs, including members of Ata Zholy, will sometimes travel to a saint's shrine to ask God for help, in the belief that the saint will intercede their behalf or that God will pay particular attention to requests made on ground blessed by the presence of a saint. Members of the piety movement see this practice as worshipping a saint, which is an example of polytheism, the gravest sin imaginable in their understanding of Islam.

An employee of the KACF told me that publishing *The Fortress* is meant to stop Kazakhs from using supplications that could lead them to the sin of polytheism, specifically by asking for the intervention of ancestors' souls and saints. This employee told me that the supplications in *The Fortress* are taken from the Qur'an and hadiths, and thus are untainted by any hint of polytheism. Khalifa Altai alludes to this in his Kazakh-language foreword to *The Fortress*:

[This book] opens a way to staying on the path of the Prophet's example, and keeps Muslims from superstitions sprung from thoughts that are foreign to our religion. Today, many people say supplications and wishes [derived] from their own knowledge, but it is good to remember this: the supplications used by our Prophet are acceptable in front of God and their rewards are great. (Altai 2004: 1)

In the cramped, computer-filled office of Musylman near the Central Mosque in Almaty, Qairat Isa similarly told me that *The Fortress* only contained "pure supplications used by the Prophet that only ask for help from God," which he contrasted with the supplications said by Kazakhs at saints' shrines.⁶

The Fortress is also an attempt to help Kazakhs perform a particular type of productive ethical work by reading the spiritually powerful words of the Prophet. The idea that supplications can bring Muslims to piety and create virtues is ultimately derived from an Aristotelian understanding of ethics, developed by early Islamic theologians in dialogue with the Qur'an and other foundational Islamic texts, in which outer forms impact inner states of being. Al-Ghazali, one of the most influential Islamic theologians, wrote in the eleventh century that supplications were a key spiritual exercise, as supplications are often used by less pious Muslims in times of need and suffering and thus bring less pious Muslims back to a proper relationship with God: "need requires supplication, and supplication brings back the heart to God with humility and submission" (al-Ghazali 1990: 91). Supplications, in this view, are not directly effective in convincing God to help Muslims. God acts of His own volition, but supplications cause a reordering of the self, which makes "preparations for the divine grace" of God to be received (Nakamura 1990: xxx, xli; see also al-Ghazali 1990: 90-91). The KACF and Musylman

Publishing House published *The Fortress* to help Kazakhs reform themselves by helping them recognize their dependence upon God through the myriad supplications presented in the book. In the vocabulary of contemporary cognitive scientists, reading supplications creates a schema in which humans are dependent upon God and it increases the likelihood that this schema will be activated in daily life. Each supplication, whether said when a fellow Muslim sneezes or before sexual intercourse, strengthens this schema.

The presses that publish *The Fortress* think that it will help Kazakh Muslims develop a proper relationship with God in three ways. First, the semantic content of the Prophet's words perfectly describes how a Muslim should ask God for help. *The Fortress* contains Kazakh translations of the Prophet's words, which sets it apart from earlier books of supplications in Kazakhstan that only contained Cyrillic transliterations of Arabic supplications (e.g., Oseruly 2004; Qarashaiyq 1998; Sarsenbai 2000). A reader who is saying a supplication while getting dressed, for example, can think about the words "Praise to God who has clothed me with these clothes and provided for me while I was powerless" (al-Qahtani 2004: 17) and understand their dependence upon God for clothes.⁷ *The Fortress* contains supplications for 132 occasions. The KACF edition details 268 different supplications for these 132 occasions, including common acts such as waking up in the morning, eating, and going to bed, as well as less regular events such as seeing the new moon or wearing new clothes. The Musylman edition is shorter and generally contains only one supplication for each occasion.

Second, *The Fortress* will help Kazakhs physically emulate the Prophet, as each supplication is given in Kazakh, Arabic, and Arabic transliterated into Kazakh Cyrillic letters. There is a language ideology in which the pronounced Arabic words of the Prophet are uniquely able to transform Muslims' thoughts and actions.⁸ Mispronouncing the Arabic words would fail to bring the reader the experience of the Prophet's infallible prayers: the supplication would not sound the same, the reader's lips and tongue would not move in the same fashion, and the supplication would not recreate a perfect state of patience (*sabyr*) and correct intention. Said Al-Qahtani, the author of *The Fortress*, writes in a different book that supplications can be said in three ways: "with tongue and heart," "with the heart alone," and "with the tongue alone" (al-Qahtani 2008: 7). The best form of supplication is said with the tongue and the heart – in other words, aloud and with the proper intention – while the other forms are less efficacious.

The Fortress brings readers' attention to the importance of Arabic as the medium of supplications in two ways. *The Fortress* includes a "reminder" on page six, before the 200 pages of supplications that make up the bulk of the text, on how to pronounce Arabic letters such as hamza; the translators assert that "these reminders are necessary for all supplications," (al-Qahtani 2004: 6) implying that the supplications should be read in Arabic. *The Fortress* also expresses its language ideology through its typography. Throughout the book, supplications are first printed in Arabic script, which is followed by the transcribed Arabic supplications set in boldface, which in turn is followed by Kazakh translations. Each supplication visually follows a hierarchy of Islamic authenticity: at the top of each supplication is an Arabic version of the supplication written in Arabic script, representing the authentic words of the Prophet. The next presentation of each supplication is in the less authentic but more accessible transliteration of the Arabic into Cyrillic, which is highlighted in bold. Finally, the last presentation of each supplication is a Kazakh translation, reflecting the general meaning of the Prophet's words. Part of the project of the KACF and Musylman is to emphasize the Arabic language supplications of the Prophet, who Muslims must understand as a model who is uniquely appropriate to emulate.

Third, in order to help Kazakhs perform this ethical work as often as possible, *The Fortress* is published as small book (both editions measure 2.4 by 3.5 inches) which readers can easily carry and refer to. *The Fortress* was originally written in Arabic by al-Qahtani, a Saudi Arabian religious scholar, in September/October 1988 (Safar 1409), as a portable abridgment of an earlier, longer work on supplications and healing. Al-Qahtani explicitly shortened the book in order to make it portable (al-Qahtani 2004: 4), and the Kazakh presses followed al-Qahtani's lead.

In the larger piety movement, outside of the KACF and Musylman, imams and leaders of study groups ask their students to buy particular Islamic books, particularly Khalifa Altai's translation of Qur'an, a collection of hadiths, and, most germane to this article, *The Fortress*. In one of the study groups I attended, all of the members of the study group owned these three books on the recommendation of Erbolat, the study group leader and an imam of the quasi-governmental Kazakhstani Muftiate (also known as the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Kazakhstan). Erbolat also told me he instructs his students to memorize supplications in order to please God:

They know they should only ask for God's pleasure, not their own benefit. They should memorize many of these supplications. They should know the supplications to say before daily prayers (*namaz*) and others: supplications when you go to the bathroom and when you leave [the bathroom], and supplications for when you go on everyday trips [e.g., to work or to home]. I have told them this.

Other leaders of the piety movement describe more precisely how supplications please God and bring ethical benefits to Muslims. Another member of the Kazakhstani Muftiate, for example, argues that:

“Supplication is worship” [according to the words of the Prophet found in hadiths of Abu Tirmizi and Abu Dauud]. It is known that we should not perform this worship to see benefits in this world. Similarly, we have to supplicate as worship and trust that [supplication's] fruit will be seen on Judgment Day. Thus, in supplication, we need patience (*sabyrlyq*) and perseverance (*tabandylyq*). (Utyskhan 2010)

This worship will “raise a Muslim's [spiritual] level” (Utyskhan 2010) and help them create the moral character necessary to be judged well on Judgment Day. Although leaders of the piety movement make their descriptions of the ethical benefits of supplication more accessible than al-Ghazali's work and stress the eventual value of developing an ethical character on Judgment Day, the message is similar. Supplication should not be done for material benefit, but in order to please God by becoming a better Muslim and showing obedience to God.

Reading *The Fortress* to develop virtues and prepare for God's grace

The Fortress is one of the most popular Islamic books in Kazakhstan, outselling all other Islamic books except for the Qur'an at different points in the first part of the 21st century.⁹ Members of the piety movement have played a large role in making the book popular, buying it in order to recite supplications and make themselves more worthy of God's grace. In this

section, I follow in the footsteps of anthropologists (e.g., Mahmood 2005; Hirschkind 2006), who have examined how willing subjects use various techniques to bring themselves in line with ethical discourses. Saba Mahmood's paradigmatic examples focus on how Muslim women in Egypt develop modesty and piety by wearing veils and humility through daily prayer. Members of the piety movement in Kazakhstan, like Usen, develop patience and mindfulness of God by reading supplications. This ethical work is intentional. Aigul, a young female member of the piety movement who often met me in a Turkish-run halal café while dressed in a loose dress and a tight headscarf, elaborated on the ethical work she accomplishes with supplications, telling me that reading supplications help develop patience and steadfastness (*sabyr*):

Every Muslim must read [*The Fortress*], and I think that [every Muslim] should know that before the start of any act it is necessary to read supplications like this. If we come to the results of reading supplications like this, from the spiritual side the more I think my spiritual world will become a little quieter, and become a little lighter. I feel this way myself. If a person is patient, they can endure many difficulties. I strive to be patient and steadfast. Of course, I train myself to be patient (*oz-ozimdi sabyrly bolugha tarbieleimin*), and supplications help that training.

De Certeau's concept of tactics helps to interpret individual members of the piety movement's use of *The Fortress*. De Certeau describes a tactic as "a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus" (de Certeau 1984: 36-37). If a strategy is the action of an institution with power and goals, a tactic is the action of an individual without institutional power. To return to de Certeau's example of strategies and tactics in a city: pedestrians walking in a city do not simply follow the grid of streets meant to manage their travels. Instead, they have tactics of making this grid their own. They take shortcuts across lawns, defying the strategies of institutions. They stop to talk to each other in the middle of sidewalks and force other walkers to venture out into the street to avoid them. In short, they inhabit the ground created and managed by strategies.

Similarly, members of the piety movement inhabit the metaphorical grid of streets created by the publishers of *The Fortress*. However, unlike the pedestrians de Certeau focuses on, members of the piety movement intentionally follow this grid. Like pedestrians who obey traffic lights because they think their obedience will create traffic patterns advantageous to themselves and others, members of the piety movement seek to bring themselves in line with the Islamic ideals of institutions of the piety movement and to develop a pious character using the materials published by institutions of the piety movement.¹⁰ In order to do this, they use particular tactics, some which are taken from the strategies of these institutions and some of which are not, as even willing subjects cannot perfectly enact the ideals of piety.

The first tactic that members of the piety movement use to develop virtues is to memorize supplications in Arabic, just as advocated by al-Qahtani in *The Fortress*. (All imams that I spoke with, however, make the allowance that a supplication said in any language is valid.) Most members of the piety movement read supplications aloud in Arabic, as long as they are not in a public space where their audible supplication would be disruptive to others, such as a crowded bus. Several members of the piety movement mentioned that God understands and forgives readers who do not utter the Prophet's supplications perfectly, as readers' intentions are admirable, but Kazakh-language supplications are less effective, as Aigul told me: "I try to read

supplications in Arabic because the Qur'an is in Arabic. Generally, Allah accepts supplications in any language. But because the Qur'an is in Arabic and our Prophet's words were in Arabic, they are flawless... If you read supplications in Arabic the benefits will be more." Similarly, Zhanar, a 65 year-old retired woman, told me that, "If one person is reading supplications in an ordinary language and one person is reading supplications in Arabic, and you listen to those people's supplications, you will know which one is closer to your soul." For Aigul and Zhanar, the Arabic words of the Prophet are particularly effective in reaching Muslims' hearts and are uniquely able to bring about changes in people due to the perfection of the Prophet's conduct and intentions. The sound of the Prophet's Arabic speech has the spiritual power to make people more moral.

Complementing the memorization of Arabic-language supplications is a second tactic of members of the piety movement: conscious and deliberate thought about the semantic content of supplications they frequently recite, which is made possible by the decision of the KACF and Musylman to publish Kazakh translations of supplications. Aigul told me that she recites the following supplication before she sleeps and when she wakes up in the morning: "O God, in your name I die (sleep) and in your name I live (awaken)." She explained that she consciously thinks about this short prayer when she recites it and that it perfectly encapsulates both a Muslim's daily routine and a Muslim's entire life – each day and each life must be devoted to God – and that the Prophet had spoken perfectly. The parenthetical words included in the original text reinforce the notion that the structure of each day is similar to the structure of an entire life. Aigul said that each time she pronounced the supplication, she thought she was becoming closer to understanding how the Prophet lived as God's servant each day, and reminded herself that the actions of each day would be judged by God.

A third tactic that members of the piety movement use is to carry the book with them throughout the day. This tactic helps them to be prepared to ask God for help as often as they can and in many diverse situations, just as Usen had argued. Another member of the piety movement told me that *The Fortress* was the most important book he had because "he could always have faith" if he had the book with him. A third member of the piety movement told me that simply carrying the book with her, even if she did not recite any supplications from it, helped her to be cognizant of God. The decisions of the KACF and Musylman paid off: members of the piety movement carry *The Fortress* with them and consider its small size to be a great asset.

A fourth tactic that some members of the piety movement use to develop patience and cognizance of their dependence on God is to read *The Fortress* linearly, from cover to cover. This is not a practice that I have seen advocated in the piety movement's publications or heard in sermons or study groups. When I asked Erbolat, the imam and study group leader discussed above, about reading *The Fortress* from cover to cover, he looked at me quizzically and asked "who would do that? You should memorize some important supplications. But Islam is not meant to be a burden. There is no need to read this from start to finish. Here [points to the index] is a list of topics. You just read the supplication you need at the time." However, in their attempt to become as pious as possible, many members of the piety movement – and in particular, older members of the piety movement – told me that it is necessary to read most or all of the supplications in the book. Zhanar told me:

To read supplications in only a particular situation [by looking it up in the index] is not right... Truly, supplications have a lot of value in every situation in life. If

you are prepared with supplications, you will not get entangled in evil. In [*The Fortress*], supplications of our Prophet intended for use in any situation are given. To give some ordinary examples: sleeping, getting up, eating, going to the bazaar, entering a house, leaving a house, supplications against an enemy and when scared, and supplications for happiness, fasting, buying new clothes, anger, getting married, and for other all situations.

Zhanar is an aging Muslim who lived a very secular life during the Soviet era and hopes to make up for her previous life by asking God for help as often as possible. Her list of “ordinary” examples, which includes buying new clothes and getting married, demonstrates the depth of her level of knowledge of the supplications in *The Fortress* acquired by reading the book from start to finish. Zhanar’s novel tactic – which a leader of the piety movement, Erbolat, sees as unnecessary and even as a burden for Muslims – demonstrates the inevitable heterogeneity of everyday life that de Certeau emphasizes; even willing subjects seeking to follow an institution occasionally escape its disciplinary grid.

Using *The Fortress* to develop virtues should not overshadow the basic notion of supplication: asking God for aid. Members of the piety movement hope that God will answer their supplications. However, they believe God will reward those who walk on His path, and thus they hope to read supplications that will help them walk on God’s path and become closer to God. Muslims with true faith, in this view, do not use supplications to ask for an easier or better life, but to work on their own piety. As Usen said, “God protects faithful people.” Members of the piety movement don’t ask God to protect them, but attempt to make themselves more faithful so that God will protect them.

Learning about supplications in Ata Zholy

Ata Zholy was an officially registered business in Kazakhstan that ran pilgrimages.¹¹ The Kazakhstani government, ostensibly for harming pilgrims’ health, shut down this business in 2009 (Plakhotnikov 2009; Samrat 2009). More broadly, Ata Zholy is a popular Islamic movement – although less popular now that the official business has been closed – that seeks to reinvigorate “traditional Islam” in Kazakhstan (Jessa 2006a, 2006b; Schwab 2012). Members of Ata Zholy tend to focus their Islamic practice on pilgrimages to saints’ shrines, domestic rituals such as reciting the Qur’an for deceased ancestors, and a new type of ritual specific to this organization in which Muslim saints are channeled by mediums of Ata Zholy. Many Kazakhstani Muslims find pilgrimages run by Ata Zholy attractive and useful, but dislike or distrust the attempts of leaders of Ata Zholy to channel the spirit of an ancestor or saint. Given Ata Zholy’s emphasis on shrine pilgrimage, which 88% of Kazakhstani Muslims find acceptable (Pew Research Forum 2012: 96), and asking ancestors for aid, which 51% of Kazakhstani Muslims believe is acceptable in Islam (Pew Research Forum 2012: 101), the number of Kazakhstani Muslims with similar beliefs to Ata Zholy is much larger than the number of Kazakhstani Muslims in the piety movement. However, Kazakhstani Muslims who are divided by understandings of shrine pilgrimage and some other ritual performances, like Ata Zholy and the piety movement, share stances on many beliefs, rituals, and social issues. For example, members of Ata Zholy and the piety movement see the Prophet as the highest exemplar of virtue and value praying five times a day, even if the vast majority of people associated with Ata Zholy do not pray five times a day. Members of both groups also see homosexuality as morally wrong,

as do 92% of Kazakhstani Muslims (Pew Research Forum 2013: 81), and think sex outside of marriage is morally wrong, as do 75% of Kazakhstani Muslims (Pew Research Forum 2013: 80).

However, unlike members of the piety movement, who usually have learned about Islam from books published by the movement and in study groups, members of *Ata Zholy* generally have learned about Islam from family members, during ceremonies where leaders of *Ata Zholy* channel the words of deceased saints, and on pilgrimages to saints' shrines (Schwab 2012).¹² Most germane to their understanding of supplication, members of *Ata Zholy* have learned that particular things, times, people, and places have the spiritual power to fulfill their requests. This understanding of supplication stands in great contrast to the idea that God responds to Muslims' requests only according to His plan and Muslims' individual moral qualities.



To give an example of this type of belief in action, I present a short account of a pilgrimage that I went on with an *Ata Zholy* group in 2010 to the Five Forefathers.¹³ My fellow pilgrims and I traveled in two cars along the foothills of the Tien Shan, making our way to shrines with views of green mountain meadows to the south and the seemingly endless steppe to the north. We discussed various aspects of the Five Forefathers' lives in connection with the landscape, romantically recalling a past when “Zhambyl Ata [one of the Five Forefathers] lived here!” as well more mundane topics, such as the latest pop songs. At first, I believed that the pilgrims were simply longing for an idealized past. However, it became clear that they were constructing a moral community through narratives of the past. For example, Zhambyl Ata attempted to keep alive Islamic traditions during the Soviet era, as Kazakhs should continue to do, while another saint named Ukasha Ata, whose shrine was not part of the Five Forefathers tour, had exemplified devotion to God by not stopping his prayers even when a non-Muslim

army attacked him.

The group I was traveling with first stopped at Sarybai Ata's shrine, where the group recited the Qur'an with other pilgrims, and silently asked for help from God. One young man who was on the trip had been badly burned, and was traveling to the Five Forefathers to hasten his healing. The shrine caretaker told him that he would heal within the week if they recited a supplicatory prayer at Sarybai Ata's shrine. When I asked my fellow pilgrims why their supplications at the shrine were so effective, I received a few different answers. Most of the pilgrims told me that God's divine light (*nur*) is concentrated around saints' shrines due to their piety and that the land of the shrine was "closer to God" (*Qudaigha zhaqynraq*). This, quite literally, meant that a supplicant's prayer had an easier path to reach God in the Heavens. One man told me that God accepted requests from pilgrims because He wanted to show respect to saints. Others said that the saint would "support" (*goldau*) them in the future. These answers shared a common notion that some places and people had the power to ensure their requests were heard and answered by God: saints may directly intervene with God to ensure He hears supplicants' prayers, or else the spiritual power of the saint would place the supplicant in spiritual proximity to God. At other shrines on our pilgrimage, different objects acted as a focus of God's power. For example, at Suyinbai Ata's shrine, the pilgrims placed their hands on a black rock – which I was told was taken from Mecca by the President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbaev – and made a wish, hoping that God would fulfill their wish due to the spiritual power (*bereke*) of the rock.

The importance of spiritual power of objects, times, places, people, and words is crucial to members of Ata Zholy's reading of *The Fortress*. One young man told me that the supplications in *The Fortress* are "closer to God" than other supplications, echoing the language used to describe saints' shrines. This same young man looked somewhat askance at my question, as it was obvious to him that if saints were "closer to God," then the Prophet and his words would be even closer. A young woman told me that the supplications in *The Fortress* were "powerful" (*kushti*) whereas other supplications were weak (*alsiz*). For members of Ata Zholy, morally exemplary individuals such as saints and holy places such as Mecca accrued spiritual power or divine essence by virtue of being closer to God, and this virtue increased supplications' likelihood of being accepted by God.¹⁴ This concept can be fruitfully compared with members of the piety movement's understanding of the power of the Prophet's speech. For members of Ata Zholy, the Prophet's speech has an easier path to God; for members of the piety movement, the Prophet's speech has an easier path to human's souls.

The way that another interlocutor views *The Fortress* and morally exemplary people clarifies the link between their spiritual powers. Raushan is a 45 year-old woman from southern Kazakhstan who moved to Almaty in the late 1980s. She comes from what she describes as a "traditional" household from near Turkistan and prides herself on learning about Islam from her grandparents. She prays five times a day and used to attend Friday prayers at Almaty's Central Mosque, but stopped when she was pressured by female members of the piety movement to wear what she considers an "Arab hijab." She sees members of the piety movement as attempting to destroy Kazakh traditions of healing and is deeply antagonistic to them. She has gone on pilgrimages with Ata Zholy, although she more often goes on pilgrimage with her family, as she is not sure if she believes that members of Ata Zholy can actually channel the words of saints.

Raushan believes her brother is a person with spiritual gifts (*qasiet bar adam*) due to his simple and moral lifestyle. Her brother "does not spend money on clothes" and more generally, is not vain or materialistic. He has also stayed in Raushan's ancestral village and herds sheep, a

continuation of what she considers to be the moral lifestyle of her ancestors. A devout ancestor visited him in a dream because of his moral lifestyle, and told Raushan's brother that he would have the power to heal people. Raushan gave me many examples of her brother's gift. Her brother once healed a young Russian boy who was sick with tuberculosis by reciting the Qur'an for him and asking God for help. The Russian family was so impressed by the power of his prayers that they converted to Islam. Her brother also healed a man who was in a coma after falling off his horse during a game of buzkashi (Kazakh: *kokpar*) by asking his ancestor for help in a dream and then reciting the Qur'an for this ancestor. The ancestor drove out an evil spirit who had attached itself to the comatose man and the man soon awoke from his coma.

Similarly, Raushan believes that the supplications in *The Fortress* have a particular spiritual characteristic or gift (*qasietti dughalar*). She related that she recovers from illness faster when she recites supplications from *The Fortress* rather than using supplications she has thought of. A supplication from *The Fortress* even helped her heal a relative with stomach pains, which Raushan believed had been stomach cancer. Raushan usually recites supplications from *The Fortress* for herself, but for serious matters, she usually calls her brother to have him recite supplications from *The Fortress* for her. For example, after Raushan lost her job, her heart began to hurt. She asked her brother to recite a supplication intended to heal her heart and ease her stress. Due to the spiritual power of the Prophet's words, her brother's spiritual gifts, and the support of her family's devout ancestor, his prayers were heard by God and Raushan's heart stopped hurting.

For Raushan and other members of Ata Zholy, a good moral character, whether the exemplary character of the Prophet or the lesser but still remarkable morality of saints or community members, creates closeness to God, which makes a supplication more likely to be heard by God. The act of supplication, however, is not something that makes a Muslim more moral. It is meritorious, but not moral training, just as in football scoring a touchdown is meritorious but does not prepare a player to score more touchdowns. It should be stressed that other types of moral training are important for members of Ata Zholy, such as listening to one's family or modeling one's life on moral exemplars such as saints. However, supplications are simply meant to ask God for help, and some supplications are more effective because of their closeness to God.

Reading *The Fortress* to find spiritually powerful words

If we return to de Certeau's imagery of urban planners and pedestrians in a city, Ata Zholy's leaders do not possess sufficient funding or governmental backing to create their own grid of streets. Members of Ata Zholy are thus forced to become jaywalkers and shortcut-takers in the grid of streets laid out by Musylman and the KACF. They enter the grid of streets produced by Musylman and the KACF because they recognize the importance and spiritual power of the Prophet's words. However, members of Ata Zholy ignore the particular ideology of the planners of this grid; they make their own pathways. As metaphorical jaywalkers and shortcut-takers, members of Ata Zholy do not share many tactics; they simply try to get where they are going as fast as possible or in the way most convenient to them. Some members of Ata Zholy recite supplications in Arabic, while others recite them in Kazakh; some recite supplications daily, yet the vast majority recite supplications less often. The one reading tactic they share is using the index to find spiritually powerful supplications that will be effective in obtaining God's help, just as Raushan did to find a supplication to help heal her heart and Osken

did to find a supplication to cure his mother's illness.

A young man named Ghaziz provides another example of this tactic. He pointed out supplications in the index to me while making the following argument:

[*The Fortress*] is a very useful book. God waits for people's supplications at all times, especially during the last third of the night. Therefore, if you remember God and ask God at this time with good intentions, He will give what we ask for. For me, most of the Islamic books I have seen are books of supplications. [Pointing at the index] It is easy to protect against the evil eye and other illnesses with supplications from *The Fortress*, I think. There are supplications on other topics, such as supplications to defeat enemies. And there are other supplications that are very useful (*paidaly*) in our lives.

In this view, *The Fortress* is a "useful" or "profitable" book because it provides spiritually powerful supplications, which make it "easy" to defeat enemies or protect against the evil eye. Most strikingly, Ghaziz's statement on God's protection from the evil eye stands in direct contrast to Usen's argument on the same subject. For Ghaziz, some prayers are simply more likely to reach God and secure protection; for Usen, God protects those who have made themselves worthy of protection by becoming morally fit.

Other members of Ata Zholy discussed their use of the supplications in *The Fortress* in similar ways. One young woman told me that the only supplication she recited was a supplication asking God to provide clothes for her, which she had found in the index while perusing the book at a kiosk. It was the sole reason she bought the book. She had a low-paying job and was very concerned with her ability to buy the latest fashion. She asked God to ensure that her expensive new clothes did not wear out. She believed that God would help her because the Prophet's words always reach God, even though she thought that buying expensive new clothes was not a moral act. Unlike members of the piety movement, who attempted to become more moral through supplication, this young woman was asking God to help her in an endeavor that was morally neutral, or even slightly suspect. In her view, the words of the Prophet are accepted by God due to their divine essence and proximity to God rather than an individual supplicant's moral character.

Conclusion

In this article, I have used de Certeau's concepts of strategies and tactics to describe the ways that presses associated with the piety movement attempt to influence Kazakh Muslims through the publication of *The Fortress*, and what readers do with *The Fortress*. The KACF and Musylman have procured financial capital by attracting wealthy Kazakh and foreign patrons. With this capital, they published *The Fortress* to lock Kazakhs into a particular type of supplicatory practice, in which they become more cognizant of God every day, develop virtues such as patience, and avoid polytheism. The KACF and Musylman used various methods to accomplish this, including publishing a physically small book, printing Cyrillic transcriptions of Arabic supplications, and supplying Kazakh translations of Arabic supplications.

I have attempted to add to the literature on consumer tactics by showing how members of the piety movement are willing subjects who did not hope to subvert the goals of Islamic presses but rather hoped to follow presses' instructions as closely as possible. Often, they succeed and

use some of the tactics that presses hope they will use. Members of the piety movement carry *The Fortress* with them to help them remember God and memorize Arabic supplications from *The Fortress*, for example. However, given the incomplete nature of human communication and unpredictability of everyday life, members of the piety movement also wander off the paths of the disciplinary grid created by institutions of the piety movement.

Members of Ata Zholy learn a relevant ideology of supplication on pilgrimages where they seek God's help in conjunction with the blessings of saints, in direct contradiction to one of the goals of the KACF and Musylman. Members of Ata Zholy also use *The Fortress* in heterogeneous ways, including saving the supplications from the book for important occasions and having a blessed family member read particularly important supplications for them. These heterogeneous tactics illustrate the various ways that readers unassociated with the piety movement in Kazakhstan use the products of a dominant Islamic movement for their own purposes.

More generally, the ways in which *The Fortress* is produced and read are characteristic of how Islamic media products are produced and consumed in Central Asia. Well-funded reformist institutions produce the majority of Islamic media, but different groups of Muslims interpret their message in many ways. De Certeau's concepts of strategies and tactics can help scholars and policymakers delineate the influence of reformist Islamic institutions in Central Asian society and how Central Asians make do within repressive religious environments.

¹ It should be noted that Usen's explanations of the benefits of frequent supplication is supported by research on the stress-reducing effects of prayer (e.g., Sosis and Handwerker 2011) and religious priming (Inzlicht and Tullett 2010). Classical Islamic thought on the role of supplication is quite consistent with modern psychological theories.

² There is also an out-of-print edition of *The Fortress* published by Nash Mir in 2002.

³ Khalifa Altai's students include well-known and influential members of the piety movement in Kazakhstan, such as Mukhametzhan Tazabekov, the head of the Islamic television station Asyl Arna, and Abdurakhman Eskindir, the current head of the KACF.

⁴ For a more complete description of the history and development of Musylman, see Schwab 2011.

⁵ I use Foucault's (1977) famous formulation of surveillance and discipline because it inspired De Certeau's understanding of strategies (de Certeau 1984: xiv). De Certeau, however, insists that Foucault sees discipline procedures as far too encompassing, and asks if anything escapes these procedures. De Certeau's most famous formulation of this "escape" "without leaving the dominant social order" (de Certeau 1984: xiii) is "tactics," as used in this paper. However, de Certeau also asks if there are disciplinary procedures or techniques of living that simply remain outside of dominant social orders, making room for heterogeneous disciplines in society or institutions (de Certeau 1984:47-49).

⁶ The intercession of saints and praying at their shrines is, of course, a major controversy in the Islamic world, particularly since the beginning of the 20th century, although the controversy's roots go back to at least Ibn Tamiyya. See a more programmatic presentation of intercession in Islam in Hoffman 2014.

⁷ All translations from *The Fortress* are mine; for interested readers, there is an official English-language version of *The Fortress* (al-Qahtani 2001).

⁸ The importance and power of Arabic and Qur'anic speech and text is well-accounted for throughout the Islamic world. Charles Hirschkind discusses the importance of what he calls "godly speech" in his work on Islamic tape audition: "The utility of tape audition for the task of ethical self-improvement is founded on a language ideology foregrounding the performative dimension of godly speech and its capacity to reform and attune a rightly disposed heart" (Hirschkind 2006: 74).

⁹ My figures on sales of Islamic literature come from Meloman/Booking, the largest chain of bookstores in Kazakhstan. According to Meloman store salesmen, *The Fortress* was popular enough to land on the overall weekly bestseller list at several points in 2009, joining the ranks of other bestsellers such as Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series and business advice books for young professionals. For example, it was the thirteenth most sold book at Meloman between April 27 and May 5, 2009 and the sixteenth most sold book the week before. *The Fortress* was a perennial religious bestseller at Meloman between 2007 and 2010, the period that Meloman tracked religious literature sales. (Meloman stopped selling Islamic literature in 2011 after the government of Kazakhstan began to monitor the sale of Islamic literature more closely following a spate of terrorist attacks.) Between 2007 and 2010, *The Fortress* vastly outsold even other bestselling Islamic literature. In 2009, for example, the bestselling Islamic books were the Qur'an and *The Fortress*, which sold 3603 and 3453 copies, respectively. The sixth bestselling book, *The Atlas of the Qur'an*, only sold 385 copies. The popularity of the book is so great that the main Islamic television channel in Kazakhstan, Asyl Arna, has special short segments on different supplications from the book, including dramatizations of the situations supplications should be used in and a guide to the Arabic pronunciation of supplications.

¹⁰ My emphasis on the attempt of members of the piety movement to follow the lead of institutions of the piety movement is meant to counter the use of de Certeau's language of "tactics" to champion "popular" practices that resist or defy powerful institutions or strategies (e.g., Jenkins 1992). I hope to follow in de Certeau's footsteps of examining heterogeneity and his antipathy toward the straightforward application of theoretical tool-kits – such as the application of popular resistance "tactics" (Highmore 2007: 19) – by including the practices of Kazakh Muslims who do not resist the intentions of Islamic publishers but attempt to willingly obey and emulate the ideals of these publishers. Allowing for the willing obedience of the weak is particularly apt given de Certeau's hope that our sociological theories can be altered by our encounter with everyday practices (Highmore 2007: 19) – in this case, the practices of Muslims who see themselves as ignorant and powerless to live a good life without God's instruction and thus hope to obey God. Tactics of the weak must include willing obedience or, more properly, various practices of willing obedience, which may still escape complete control of powerful strategies. For a further examination of de Certeau's vocabulary of strategies and tactics, and in particular the reductive uses of tactics to glorify "popular" practices, see Highmore 2006 and Buchanan 2000.

¹¹ Technically, Ata Zholy was a limited liability partnership (*zhauapkershiligi shektelui seriktestik*).

¹² Members of Ata Zholy generally own much less Islamic literature than members of the piety movement. For example, among one community of Ata Zholy, each member owned 2.25 books on average (27 total books owned by 12 members). In a study group of the piety movement, each member owned 12.21 books on average (171 total books owned by 14 members). Every member of the study group owned *The Fortress*, whereas only five of the 12 members of the Ata Zholy community owned *The Fortress*. In each group, *The Fortress* and the Khalifa Altai translation of the Qur'an were the most popular books.

¹³ For a more complete description of a pilgrimage to the Five Forefathers, see Dubuisson and Genina 2011.

¹⁴ For other examples of the *wali* (a believer who is close to God) and the general idea of “closeness to God” in Central Asia, see Privratsky 2001:156; Louw 2007:58; Kehl-Bodrogi 2008:153. In the wider Muslim world, see Karamustafa 2007; for a contemporary example in Sudan, see Solomon 2013: 837-838.

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