The Kazakhs

People Profile

Who are the Kazakhs?

The Kazakhs, a Turkic people, are the second largest Muslim people group of Central Asia. In the past, they were perhaps the most influential of the various Central Asian ethnic groups. From their earliest history the Kazakhs were nomads, following their herds across the Central Asian steppes from summer mountain pastures to winter valleys. In the 13th century Genghis Khan brought an influx of Turkic Mongol tribes that displaced the original inhabitants of the Kazakh steppe. Then, after the end of the Mongolian Empire, the Uzbek Empire arose in Kazakhstan. While most of this tribal federation moved south into the present-day Uzbekistan some tribes split away and remained behind. They were called Kazakh. So the difference between Uzbeks and Kazakhs is primarily political, not ethnic, although today their languages and cultures differ. There are now over 10 million Kazakhs in the world; 7.9 million live in Kazakhstan, making up 48.3% of the population, 1.2 million live in China, 808,000 in Uzbekistan, 636,000 in Russia, and there are smaller communities in Mongolia, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Ukraine, Iran, Afghanistan and Turkey.

Culture

Language: Kazakh is a member of the Central Turkic group of languages, which also includes Kyrgyz and Karakalpak. Kazakh was written with the Arabic script until 1929; with the Roman alphabet from 1929 to 1940; and with the Cyrillic alphabet since 1940. Kazakh employs the 33 letters of standard Russian, plus nine additional letters.

Poetry and song: Oral epics combining poetry with prose hold a prominent position in Kazakh culture. Handed down the generations, these historical pieces describe the nomadic life and the dangers the Kazakhs face. The *Akyn* (poet) travelled from *ayul* (camp) to *ayul* narrating oral epics and engaging in singing or *Aylis* competitions (an *aylis* is poetry composed on the spot and recited to improvised music). The subjects range from love, beauty, honour and praise of tribe or village to social problems.

Dress: In urban areas most Kazakhs wear western-style dress, generally more formal than in the west. Younger girls wear jeans and shorts, especially in the cities, but older women still only wear dresses. In villages most married women still wear head scarves. Shoes are not worn inside as this is seen as dirty.

Diet: The national dish is called *Besbarmak*, which literally means five fingers, describing the way it used to be eaten. It is a boiled dish with a base of broad noodles, potatoes and onions, topped with mutton. Kazakhs eat a variety of meat, including horsemeat. Bread must not be put upside down, nor put out in odd numbers as this means someone in the family has died. It is fed to animals rather than wasted.

Hospitality: Kazakh hospitality is exceptional. The host is obliged to offer food and tea to each guest who comes to the door. Guests should accept, at the minimum, a piece of bread and two cups of tea, or the host will be offended. When a visitor arrives it is rude for the host to ask many questions. After the visitor has had refreshment and a rest, he then may tell his host whom he is, where he is from and where he is headed.

Economy

The Kazakh economy is based on agriculture and mineral resources. Oil, coal, iron, copper and many other valuable minerals are mined in various locations. Since the 1930s, a large percentage of Kazakhs have lived in the cities, held professional or manufacturing jobs, and spoken Russian instead of Kazakh. However many people, especially the retired, are living in extreme poverty. High taxes and corruption inhibit the growth of new businesses, which could improve the economy. For many, only the food grown at their *dachas* (garden plots) keeps them from hunger and some have been reduced to begging on the streets.

Society

Social organisation: The basic unit of traditional Kazakh society was the extended family called the *ayul* (camp). This was led by an *Aksakal* (white beard). Several *ayuls* formed a *ru* (tribe) and all members claimed descent from a common male ancestor, seven generations back. The tribes were grouped into three *zhuz* (Hordes or tribal confederations): The Great Horde, the Central Horde, and the Minor Horde. Kazakhs believed they were all one family; so when two Kazakhs met, their relationship was established from their family trees straight away. Kinship had outworkings in marriage, politics and hospitality. When guests were being entertained,

places of honour and delicacies were distributed according to rank. Members of the Great Horde were held in special esteem. Kazakhs see themselves not as individuals but as part of the group. From an early age children are taught to respect and obey their elders, and status and avoidance of scandal play a central role in Kazakh life.

Marriage: Kazakh girls used to be married young in arranged marriages. Today most girls marry between 18 and 21 years old and parents seldom choose the partners. When the youngest son marries, he inherits the family home and takes care of his parents. His wife is under the authority of her mother-in-law and takes on all household duties. Bride stealing still takes place, but generally by car instead of on horseback as it used to be. Divorce is on the increase. Men usually remarry, but a divorced woman is 'undesirable'. She usually goes back to live with her parents, but is seldom well received.

Religious life and Islam

Most of the Turkic Mongol tribes who came to the Kazakh steppe in the 13th century were Shamanists and Buddhists, but there were a few Nestorian Christians. Shamanism is the belief in a conflict between good and evil into which ancestral spirits intervene. Today the Kazakhs practise Folk Islam, which is a mixture of Shamanism and Islam. Belief in the 'evil eye' is central to Folk Islam, and amulets are worn for protection. There are also many things Kazakhs practise or avoid for the fear of evil spirits. Despite all soviet efforts to curb these customs in the past, the Kazakhs have clung to them as symbols of their identity.

Islam: The Kazakhs are Sunni Muslims who follow the Hanafi School of law. The rulers of Kazakhstan adopted Islam in 1043, but the majority of Kazakhs knew very little of it until the 17th century. The switch to Islam was above all a sign of social elevation, and it did not mean the abandonment of Shamanistic beliefs and traditional common law (*Adal*), which was better suited to the nomadic lifestyle than Islamic law. At present strict Islam is not observed by many, particularly not the more European Kazakhs in the cities. These look down on the village Kazakhs as being backward, who in turn look down on their "Russified" cousins as being cultural traitors. However Kazakh life does carry the stamp of Islam from the cradle to the grave. Rituals such as circumcisions, Islamic weddings and Islamic funerals are universally followed. There is now a growing interest in Islam, the Koran has been translated into Kazakh, new mosques are being built and Islamic literature is being distributed.

Contact with Christianity

In the last century, Russian Orthodox missionaries sought to win converts among the Kazakh people, but with little success. During the communist period, European Christians living in Kazakhstan witnessed under difficult conditions and persecution. Now Christians from abroad are sharing in reaching Kazakhs with the Gospel and many new churches have been established since 1990 by Western, Russian and Korean missionaries among their own populations in Kazakhstan. More recently, they have started some Kazakh-speaking services and a few Kazakhs have responded. There are now 37 Kazakh-speaking churches in Kazakhstan. By 1999 there were 6,948 Kazakh Christians; 5,000 in Kazakhstan; 1,800 in Uzbekistan; 100 in Russia; 20 in Mongolia; 20 in China; 5 in Turkey and 3 in Kyrgyzstan. The Jesus film is available in Kazakh and has proved to be very effective in evangelism. Christian radio programmes are transmitted in Kazakh and the translation of the Bible into the Kazakh language is still underway, with almost all of the New Testament, Genesis and ten Psalms now published. Kazakh Christians need to be trained as pastors.

Opportunities to reach the Kazakhs: More workers are needed to evangelise, teach, pastor and otherwise serve Kazakhs and their young church. There is a growing need for more translations of Bible study aids and other Christian books. There is a huge demand for English teachers in Kazakhstan at all levels; also engineers, specialists in agriculture and environmental sciences, business people, students and medical and aid workers can all be used to reach the Kazakhs. Some workers receive their visas through a registered church, and can therefore do full-time spiritual work.

Please pray:

- Praise God for the first Kazakh Christians. Pray that believers would be founded on a good knowledge of the Scriptures.
- Pray for the growth of fellowships throughout the land and for wise, Godly leaders.
- Pray for those translating the Scriptures. That they will be completed and well distributed and received among the Kazakhs.
- Pray for continuing freedom to spread the gospel and that Kazakhs will be responsive to presentation of the good news.
- Pray for more workers in Kazakhstan and that they will be strong and courageous in truth and love.
- Pray that Russian, Korean and other believers will get a vision to evangelise Kazakh neighbours in culturally relevant ways.

People International

People International is working to bring the love of Christ to the Muslim peoples of Central Asia and to establish churches among them. These people include such groups as the Aimaq, Azeris, Baluchis, Bashkirs, Dagestanis, Hazaras, Hui, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Kurds, Pukhtuns, Tajiks, Tatars, Turkmen, Turks, Uyghurs and Uzbeks. People International is an inter-denominational Christian mission, which has been in existence since 1979. Since that time, we have been researching, visiting and recruiting for Central Asia and making it known to the Christian church. We now have over 90 workers living in Central Asia, involved in church planting, friendship evangelism, Bible translation, literature distribution, medical work and teaching, among other things.

If you are interested in being involved in the work of reaching the Kazakh people, then please contact People International at:
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