



A Place of One's Own: Pilgrimage and the Reinterpretation of Culture in Russia's Ural Region

JESKO SCHMOLLER 
Humboldt University Berlin, Germany

ABSTRACT This article engages with the negotiation of Russian history and culture, focussing on the concept of tradition. Instead of contesting the concept of tradition as it is used by the state authorities, members of the Muslim minority in Russia tend to indicate tradition to claim their own culture, distinct from a new national culture stressing Orthodox Christianity and Slavic origins. By undertaking a pilgrimage to sacred sites in the south of Perm Krai, Muslim believers from the Russian Urals reconnect with the land and help to restore a lived Muslim culture that has suffered from Soviet repression and which is mostly ignored by the more recent nation-building strategies.

KEYWORDS Islam, Russian Orthodox Church, local pilgrimage, lived religion, tradition, heritage, Russian Urals

Introduction

In the largest country on the planet, matters of identity can be nothing else but complicated. [1] A homogenous national identity may be an ideal of the modern imagination that rarely conforms to the reality on the ground. On the following pages, this contrast and its consequences are critically considered. For members of the ethnic minorities in Russia, who are conscious of their history and culture, the situation has become increasingly difficult in the more recent past. Since the reform of the language policy for the ethnic republics, native language education in school has been reduced to a minimum and is no longer obligatory.¹ This is just one

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See Yusupova (2022) for further information about the language policy change and reactions to it by ethnic minority activists.

of the more glaring examples of a perception of culture and history that stresses the presence of Russian components while denying—or at least neglecting—that of others. A neglect of this kind also extends to the religious realm. In conditions where Muslims are often portrayed as outsiders, even though it was Russia that in the sixteenth century began expanding into territories where Muslim populations had formed complex societies, practising Muslims have to make careful choices about how to preserve their traditions and how to reconnect with the land.² Thus, this article enquires into the negotiation of culture in its relation to space and identity.

A number of questions inform the paragraphs of this text: Which representations of culture (national, religious, ethnic) can be observed in contemporary Russia? Who has the right to define national culture? And what might an ethnic or religious minority response to this definition be? In the Ural region of Russia, where the European continent ends and the Asian one begins, some Muslims cultivate notions of homeland and heritage that contrast with other, more dominant accounts of Russian history and culture. These notions become apparent in the context of a local Muslim pilgrimage, and I think that they may be understood as a minority claim by the local inhabitants to their own ethnic or religious culture. For the negotiation of religious culture specifically, the concept of tradition turns out to be relevant in the Russian environment. In public and private discourses and conversations, it assumes a legitimising function. A “traditional” religion, according to this logic, is a faith whose history can be traced over centuries and which thus *belongs* to the Russian space. Curiously, members of the Muslim minority do not simply ignore this discourse and consequently challenge the rules of the game, but they frequently uphold the narrative about Russia’s “traditional” religions. At the same time, “tradition” also serves to undermine the prominent position of the Russian Orthodox Church and the formative effect of Orthodox Christianity on Russian culture by transforming Russian culture from within. [2]

In the text at hand, we are not merely concerned with contrasting *positions* in regard to national culture. A term such as ‘negotiation’ may be interpreted in a discursive sense, but it can also take a more active and engaged form. The local Muslim pilgrimage discussed below, I want to suggest, moreover has a transformative effect on the immediate space. It helps to manifest a lived Muslim culture threatened by both a more pervasive religious denomination and secular principles. With some of its basic assumptions about the world around us differing radically from mainstream convictions, the embrace and validation of this lived Muslim culture may well be considered an instance of world-making. The land undergoes change, as a reality is being established that allows for miracles and supernatural intervention. [3]

Within Russia and the former Soviet space, local Muslim pilgrimage may have profited from the Soviet targeting of institutional religion, which in some people created a distrust towards official clergy and helped to transfer religious practice from the mosque to specific places of veneration (Wanner 2020; Kormina 2010, 270; Sartori 2019). But irrespective of the Soviet experience, pilgrimage to sacred places is an aspect of Muslim religious expression with a considerable history all across Europe, Asia, and Africa. As in the case of Orthodox Christian pilgrimage, we find that local Muslim pilgrimage can blend with tourism and other forms of mobility (Kormina 2010; Wanner 2020, 89). Over the previous years and decades, a most diverse landscape of sacred sites has developed in the Ural and Volga regions of Russia: the archaeological complex of Bolghar, located south of Kazan on the Volga river in the Republic [4]

2 For the return of religion as a major component of a people’s identity in other formerly Soviet states (and other contexts), see Tsyrempilov, Bigozin, Zhumabayev (2022) and Aitpaeva (2016).

of Tatarstan, but also the town of Troitsk in the Chelyabinsk region, near the border with Kazakhstan, where the grave of sheikh Zaynulla Rasulev can be found, have emerged as major Islamic pilgrimage destinations. Travel agencies catering to a Muslim clientele have added these places to their programmes, and busloads of tourists arrive throughout the year from all parts of Russia and even abroad. Other places, such as the sacred hills Narystau and Toratau from the vicinity of Sterlitamak in the Republic of Bashkortostan, have achieved an intermediate status. Whereas Narystau invites visitors once a year to a summer festival, Toratau provides “Geopark Toratau,” a major eco-touristic project, with its name. At these and other places, Muslim pilgrims engage in prayer and further religious practices. The chance to be supplied with *baraka*, an auspicious force of spiritual origins, constitutes a major incentive to visit, but differently from Orthodox Christian contexts, where places and things would be “animated with prayer,” energy does not derive from human activity here but from the presence of a saint or the closeness to God (Wanner 2020, 80–81; Kormina 2010, 275–277).

As we have seen above, people go on Muslim pilgrimages to sacred places for a number of different reasons. To this one would have to add that obviously not all pilgrims are religious to the same degree. Since the Soviet state helped to forge ethno-civic identities among groups who would otherwise have identified primarily as Muslim, one can nowadays observe a curious overlap of ethnic and religious identities (Benussi 2021, 315–16). “Ethnic Muslims”, who may conceive of their religious belonging as something resembling a hereditary trait, may in comparison with others who strictly adhere to the Islamic rules and regulations only qualify as minimally religious. And it is often these who respond positively to local pilgrimage and similar, less orthodox practices. For both religiously and secularly-minded people, the places they visit may also easily be integrated into larger narratives of community and inheritance. Golden and sometimes mythic pasts are evoked in the framework of Tatar or Bashkir nationalist projects just as much as they are meant to inspire the imagination of travellers who have purchased a round trip. Yet from a religious point of view, pilgrimage places do not necessarily benefit from all too much attention. Being rediscovered by the state can have significant consequences for places left alone for extended periods of time to develop their own social and religious dynamics. When employed for purposes of nation-building, a process of museification may set in that tends to appeal to secular visitors but also deprives those places of their religious spirit (Benussi 2021, 323–25).

I have been conducting anthropological research of Muslim belief and practice in the famously multi-ethnic and multi-religious Ural region of Russia for seven years. The material for this paper was gathered in Perm Krai, which is home to inhabitants of Slavic, Finno-Ugric, as well as Turkic descent; and while Komi and Komi-Permyak villages are to be found in the north, place names such as Kungur, Orda, Suksun, and Ashap bear testimony to the Turkic-Muslim history of the south. On two occasions, I spent an extended period of time in Barda, a rural location with an ethnic composition that is almost entirely Tatar / Bashkir and whose inhabitants communicate in the Tatar language in the street.³ With almost 9,000 inhabitants, Barda is categorised as a *selo* and constitutes the administrative centre of the Barda district. In 2021, the census registered a population of more than 24,000 people in the Barda district, of which 55% are Bashkirs, 36% Tatars, and 7,5% Russians. In economic terms, people engage mostly in agricultural work. Barda *selo* is located 125 kilometres in direct distance from the city of Perm, 143 kilometres from Izhevsk, the capital of the Udmurt Republic, and 244 kilometres from Ufa, the capital of the Republic of Bashkortostan. It is also widely regarded

3 Chernyh et al. (2009) provide rich ethnographic detail about Barda.



Figure 1 The valley of Barda in the early morning hours. Photo: Jesko Schmoller, 2016.

as the Muslim centre of Perm Krai, and Tatar cultural values help to configure social relations among family members, friends, acquaintances, and neighbours. It is important to mention, however, that not all Muslims share the same outlook in Russia, and those that I was in contact with are mostly of the vernacular kind. Other Muslims may not care so much about Tatar culture and history and tend to be less accepting of the Russian discourse about “traditional” religions.

Developments in the Religious Sphere

To be better able to understand the situation of Islam and its adherents in Russia, we must first gain an insight into the developments that took place in the religious sphere since the breakup of the Soviet Union with its state-proclaimed atheist ideology. It turns out that the course of the relationship between the state and the Muslim community is closely linked to [7]

the role that the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has assumed over the previous decades. Who would have predicted that in a once staunchly anti-religious environment, an institution such as the ROC could experience an incredibly successful comeback, making it again the predominant religious actor within Russia (Quenoy 2018, 159)? According to scholar of religion and international relations Irina du Quenoy (2018, 160–61), one can differentiate four distinct periods of the state's approach towards religion between 1990 and 2016: (1) the period of unrestricted exercise of religion from 1990 to 1997; (2) the period of managed religious pluralism from 1997 to 2008; (3) the “Orthodox turn” under Dmitry Medvedev from 2008 to 2011; and (4) the securitisation of religion under a returning president Putin from 2012 to 2016. Early on, by 1996, the political elite came to see Orthodox Christianity, but also Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism, as “traditional” for Russia. Although not explicitly declared, the predominant position of the ROC was made apparent by inviting representatives of all “traditional” religions to the second presidential inauguration of Boris Yeltsin that year, but only asking the patriarch of the ROC to give a congratulatory speech. In the same indirect fashion, the Muslim community would be turned into the unspecified “other” of the ROC over the following years, a process that might also be explained by demographic circumstances (Quenoy 2018, 167). If currently at least 15 million people, or 11% of the overall population, can be considered Muslim, this number is expected to rise significantly, so that by 2050 a minimum of 33% of Russians are estimated to be of Muslim heritage (Laruelle 2016). Such a development would significantly change the appearance of Russian society and culture, making it even more necessary, in the eyes of certain ideologues, to firmly establish a Russian national culture stressing the Slavic and Orthodox Christian heritage. The 1997 amendments to the originally Soviet Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations were meant to restrict the expansion of non-“traditional” religious movements in Russia and helped to formalise the idea of Russia's four major “traditional” religions (Quenoy 2018, 163–65; Oustinova-Stjepanovic 2019, 11). Since its reform, the law emphasises the significant role of the ROC throughout Russian history. Early on in the new millennium, public officials also began to invoke, on suitable occasions, the narrative of Russia as a bridge connecting civilisations and of the peaceful coexistence of Orthodox Christianity with the other main religions, first and foremost Islam. A real shift in policy towards religion occurred after Medvedev assumed the presidential office in 2008, aiming for a more solid position of the ROC in Russian society (Quenoy 2018, 168–70). Finally, the state gave in to three demands the Moscow Patriarchate had made repeatedly over the course of more than fifteen years: the inclusion of Orthodox religious instruction in public schools, the assignment of chaplains to military units in the army, and the return of religious property confiscated during the Russian Revolution of 1917.⁴ After several indications in this direction, the ROC started to be treated as the actual, if not officially acknowledged, state church of the Russian Federation.

The “altar and throne alliance”—a term used by Katarzyna Chawryło (2015)—has resulted in an astonishing elevation of the ROC to a position of power and influence.⁵ Subsequently, one may ask the following: If Orthodox Christianity is now becoming a central element of

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4 For an anthropological case study of religious education at the school level from central Russia, see Köllner (2019). One should mention that in practice, parents may choose Orthodox religious instruction to be replaced by secular ethics. Similarly, in Muslim-majority regions the same subject can be devoted to only Islam.

5 The term alliance already suggests, though, that when taking a closer look, relations between the state and the church are more complicated than at first sight. One should also be aware that the expression “altar and throne alliance” has been used to describe conditions during the Bourbon Restoration in nineteenth-century France and other cases before being applied to the current situation in Russia.

national culture in Russia, where does that leave Islam? Here, we return to the problem of “othering” Muslims already mentioned above. In Russia, religion tends to be closely associated with ethnic identity and culture, which could further the divide between the Russian Orthodox majority and the Muslim minority (Sauvé 2017, 16; Laruelle and Yudina 2018, 62; Quenoy 2018, 177). In a potentially conflictual situation, people of darker complexion may experience trouble for being associated with Islam, but they may also feel rejected when noticing that little efforts are made to include ethnic minority culture and history in the image of the nation, causing them to withdraw from the dialogue about national culture or shifting their loyalties elsewhere.⁶ According to a survey from the early 2000s, approximately one-third of the Russian population did not regard Muslims in a favourable way (Laruelle and Yudina 2018, 52). Another, more recent, survey from 2012 indicated that Islam was considered the religion most “foreign” to Russia, which is ironic when regarding both Russian history and the official status of Islam in the country. On one occasion, I was confronted in a scholarly environment with the opinion that the Mongol hordes had brought Islam to Russia, which can only be upheld as an argument if one were to consider all territories that Russian forces captured and incorporated over the subsequent centuries to be inherently Russian from the beginning.⁷ More generally, scholars have pointed to the existence of a dual narrative about Islam in Russia, where state officials express positive opinions about “traditional” Islam while condemning the Salafi interpretation of the faith (Laruelle and Yudina 2018, 52). These simplified representations of exceedingly complex circumstances tend to reproduce binary oppositions of “traditional” and “modern,” “Russian” and “foreign,” “moderate” and “radical,” “peaceful” and “violent,” “good” and “bad” Islam.⁸ Since it is in fact more difficult to differentiate between interpretations of Islam than suggested by the image of a “dual narrative,” I would argue that Islam as a whole and not only its radical variant faces stigmatisation. The Russian media are partly responsible for such tendencies and have strongly contributed to the reinforcement of negative sentiments towards working migration from Central Asia and Azerbaijan (Laruelle and Yudina 2018, 52). Another example for the stigmatisation of Islam, but also for a certain duality in the relationship between official declarations about Islam on the one hand and their implementation on the other, would be the very limited number of functioning mosques in the Russian capital. Although Moscow is assumed to be home to about two million Muslims, permanent residents as well as temporary migrants, only four official mosques serve their spiritual needs (Laruelle and Yudina 2018, 59; Lozinskaâ 2019). It may constitute a challenge to identify a better case that would illustrate the widespread concern with an Islamisation of Russian society.

Before moving on, let me still reflect briefly upon the last period of the state approach towards religion, which, according to du Quenoy (2018, 171–74), has been characterised by the securitisation of religion and especially Islam. Since 2012, the political elites in Russia have agreed upon two major threats for the country’s “spiritual sphere:” an outlook on life that is devoid of spirituality and allegedly prevalent in the West as well as Islamic radicalism. Regarding the latter phenomenon, securitisation denotes the political measures taken to contain the threat emanating from it, but it also refers to the transformation of the public

6 This is not to say that either the church or the state would be aiming for the conversion of Muslims to Orthodox Christianity. According to the logic of religious nationalism, each ethnic group in Russia stands in a certain faith tradition and nothing needs to be changed about that situation.

7 This also brings to mind interpretations in certain Christian circles of medieval Europe, where territories that had seen even rather superficial Christian missionary activity were being claimed for the church.

8 Much has been written about “traditional” Islam in Russia. See, for instance, Aitamurto (2019), Di Poppo (2019) or Müller (2019).

perception of this phenomenon because of the same measures (Laruelle and Yudina 2018, 47). As Verkhovsky (2018, 23–25) points out, the efforts of the state to prevent the destabilisation of the “ethno-confessional balance of the population” are informed by the well-established idea that stability and tradition are threatened from the outside instead of internal developments of a social or political nature. He also mentions that few state representatives seriously attempt to make sense of the different trends within Islam but are content with categorising them as either “traditional” or “radical.” The securitisation of Islam is most pronounced and visible in the legal realm, where both organisations and individuals are being targeted (Laruelle and Yudina 2018, 48). Together with France, Russia boasts the highest number of legal state actions against religious groups in all of Europe. For 2014 and 2015, more than 200 such cases were registered. Groups that experienced trouble (although not all of them would qualify to be categorised as radical under normal circumstances) are Hizb ut-Tahrir, Tablighi Jamaat, and the Nurcu network.⁹

Claiming One’s Own Tradition

In this paper, I would like to attend to the negotiation of religious culture, tradition, and heritage. We are also going to see how Muslim culture manifests in spite of the difficult conditions outlined above. Although an effort is made to portray Russian religious culture as inclusive, evidence suggests that some influential individuals and institutions would prefer to conceal a Muslim presence in history and culture (Schmoller 2021). I argue that Ural Muslims react to the attempt of configuring a Russian religious heritage and of permanently fixing a category that used to be more accommodating and compliant by claiming their own tradition. In these pages, this is achieved by embarking on a local Muslim pilgrimage. I further try to show how the interaction of Muslim pilgrims with their environment has an effect on both the people involved and the surrounding space. Their religious practices help to manifest a lived Muslim culture and thus to transform the environment into a mythic homeland. I want to suggest that this transformation must be understood neither as imaginary nor symbolic but as real.

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Both points, the negotiation of religious predominance and the manifestation of another culture, deserve to be treated in more detail. They are the outcome of a specific type of religious contact to be observed in Russia. In circumstances where the state develops a new imperial consciousness, where Slavic culture is being elevated to a superior rank, and where the Russian Orthodox Church becomes increasingly powerful and influential, the relationship between majority and minority culture appears to be imbalanced. While one culture, with its accompanying religion, seems to be omnipresent, the other must struggle for every inch of space. The answer to the question raised by this special issue—“whose presence, whose absences”—may be disappointing to members of the Muslim minority in Russia, even though that does not mean that one cannot resort to subversive strategies. Yet curiously, the terms of engaging with religious culture seem to be rarely either subverted or contested. In the discussion about religions considered to be “traditional” for Russia, we saw that people and institutions refer to “tradition” in order to legitimate beliefs and practices; their own as well as those of other communities.¹⁰ And since members of the Muslim minority likewise employ the

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9 For the repression of the Nurcu movement in Russia, see Tuna (2020).

10 Here, tradition is used and understood in a positive sense as something precious that has been preserved throughout the ages (Krech and Karis 2017, 1).

concept of tradition, the frame for the picture of the religious landscape painted by the Russian state remains intact. Some Muslims, however, turn to tradition with the aim of *differentiating* themselves from mainstream culture. By claiming their own tradition, they therefore do not question the picture *per se*—to once more take up the above metaphor—, but they question the composition of motives or pigments. They are unwilling to accept a representation of Russia where Islam plays no or only a marginal role.

Going on a local Muslim pilgrimage would be one of the means to claim one's own tradition. [12] After the repression in the Soviet period, and despite the current promotion of Orthodox Christian culture, Muslim believers may decide to move on the paths that their ancestors have been using and pay their respects at the graves of local saints. Thereby, they can preserve the memory of historic personages and events, are able to revive the pilgrimage as a religious custom with all of its accompanying practices, and can possibly pass this custom on to the next generation. The process may be perceived as a manifestation of a lived Muslim culture, a term that refers to the concept of lived religion in the social sciences (Orsi 2002; McGuire 2008; Knibbe and Kupari 2020). As an approach, lived religion pays special attention to how religion is being practised in the everyday lives of people. At this point, I think it is relevant to stress that the circumstances people live in inform their practices, but these practices likewise contribute to the formation of quotidian lives.¹¹ By engaging in religious practices associated with a people's ancestors, a legitimation of their culture and the self-assertion of a disregarded identity take place. If it were only for this, the discussion would be consigned to the realm of identity politics. But I think that we have to go further, as the manifestation of Muslim minority culture in the Russian Urals not only helps to determine and sustain a people's heritage but might also have a transformative effect on the environment and conjure their homeland.

But what is it that Ural Muslims look back to and consider their homeland and heritage? The [13] following section attends to perceptions of historical continuity and rupture. It is by relating to specific periods in time that local Muslim pilgrimage brings about another reality.

A State of Integrity

In their accounts, my interlocutors from Barda repeatedly refer to an era in the past when [14] a Tatar Muslim state existed that both protected its citizens and preserved their interests. The image of a polity takes shape whose territorial integrity was being upheld, just as it was possible within those borders to prevent any corruption of Tatar culture taking place. This idea can also be found in a book by the author Amir Fatyhov (2008) about the ancestors of the Permian Tatars. In this section of the article, I draw both on statements from interlocutors encountered in the ethnographic field and on the work by Fatyhov to briefly outline the idealised image of said Tatar state and the periods following its decline.

In the memory of Muslims from the south of Perm Krai, a special place is reserved for [15] the kingdom of Volga Bulgaria that existed at the confluence of the Kama and Volga rivers from the seventh to the thirteenth centuries—a period now retaining the status of a golden age of Tatar rule. Volga Bulgaria fell apart as a result of recurring Mongol attacks, and the territory was incorporated into the Ulus of Juchi and later became part of the Golden Horde. From the mid-fifteenth century until 1552, a successor state of the Golden Horde, the Khanate of Kazan, occupied the same territory as Volga Bulgaria. The Khanate of Kazan was in turn

11 For a closer engagement with lived religion, see Schmoller (2020).

brought down by Ivan the Terrible and his Russian troops; an event that, according to Kapeler (2001), signifies the beginning of Russia in the condition of a multi-ethnic empire. The siege and downfall of Kazan is usually interpreted as a serious disruption of the history of Tatar civilisation, as it meant the end of sovereignty and the beginning of foreign rule. Tatars were banished from the city and driven into the periphery, while Orthodox Christian religion and Slavic culture became predominant, meaning that many Turkic Muslims were forcibly converted to Christianity over the coming centuries if they could not escape in time. In spite of its status as the primary trauma of Muslims from the Volga and Ural regions, the fall of Kazan did not turn up much as a subject of conversation in its own right among the people from Barda and rather seems to be considered an incision that occurred before the next major incident. This would be the resistance of the Cossack leader Yemelian Pugachev in relation to the Russian Empire and its ruler Catherine II. from 1773–1775.¹² The rebellion proved unsuccessful and Pugachev was eventually beheaded in Moscow. Even though a return to the conditions enjoyed by Muslims before the arrival of the Russian forces would seem most unlikely, my interlocutors think of the Pugachev rebellion as a meaningful moment where history could have taken a different course.

The references to these specific periods do, in my opinion, tell us something about the relationship between the Tatar and Bashkir Muslim minorities on the one hand and the Russian state with its Orthodox Christian religion and Slavic population on the other, the latter of which constitute a normative frame of life in contemporary Russian society. Volga Bulgaria tends to be described in very positive terms; a perfect past when people lived an undisturbed existence and their society and culture was yet untouched by influence of any hostile forces. For inhabitants of Barda, their origin from the people of Gaina, initially a Turkic tribe associated with the Bashkir ethnic group, is often stressed in conversations. Fatyhov (2008, 60) believes that the Gaina played an important protective role for the kingdom of Volga Bulgaria, as their territory constituted the northeastern border region of the realm. To better illustrate their sphere of influence, he equates their territory with the gouvernements of Viatka, Perm, and Ufa in the Russian Empire of the more recent past (Fatyhov 2008, 73), which, if seen on a map, resembles a bracket shielding the heartland of the ancient kingdom. Fatyhov points out that the Gaina as a people retained their identity even after Volga Bulgaria dissolved.¹³ The other period to be briefly discussed here, the late eighteenth century that saw the rebellion of Pugachev, can be considered a troublesome time for Russian state power, as it was being challenged by an insurgent who adopted the name Peter III and portrayed himself as an alternative ruler to empress Catherine II (*Voennaâ Istorîâ Baškîr. Ènciklopediâ* [Military History of the Bashkirs. An Encyclopaedia] 2013, 225–30). After the new distribution of land to Russian nobles, discontent and unrest spread among the peasantry, as it found itself subordinated to the aristocracy. Apart from the Urals, the rebellion further seized western Siberia along with the middle and lower Volga region. Pugachev also recruited fighters among the ethnic minorities by addressing their problems and grievances, and particularly the Bashkirs followed him in great numbers.¹⁴ They hoped to be able to return to their traditional ways of life, including

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12 Many members of the ethnic minority populations—in the majority Bashkirs, Kalmyks, Maris, Mishars, Mordvins, Tatars, Udmurts, and Chuvashes—followed Pugachev in his struggle against the throne (*Voennaâ Istorîâ Baškîr. Ènciklopediâ* [Military History of the Bashkirs. An Encyclopaedia] 2013, 225).

13 Reading the author, one senses that the particularity of the Gaina is of real importance to him and he would not want historians to simply categorise them as another ethnic Bashkir subgroup.

14 Salavat Yulaev, who joined Pugachev in his efforts and attempted to liberate his people, is today regarded a national hero in Bashkortostan.

their native faith and laws, and once more gain ownership over their former lands, waters, and forests. Possibly, some held on to the dream of once again reinstating Turkic Muslim rule.

The above notions of homeland and heritage contrast considerably with more dominant accounts of Russian history. Especially the more patriotic and heroic interpretations of history tend to draw a sharp line between the Russian state in its different incarnations and the Tatar khanates with their Muslim societies. A binary opposition between “us” and “them” is set in place. Such a restrictive and exclusive reading of history usually does not consider the prior existence of Volga Bulgaria or other non-Russian states worth mentioning. But for Muslims from Barda, it constitutes a primary source of ethnic and religious identification, possibly in opposition to the new Russian national identity that is being promoted. Different from the case of Volga Bulgaria, the rebellion of Pugachev is an event that enjoyed real prominence in Soviet history-writing, as it lends itself to a Marxist analysis of class struggle. But whereas Pugachev used to be perceived as a sympathetic figure who stood up against unjust repression and exploitation, the overall picture has become more complicated with the vindication of Tsarist rule and power. Siding with Pugachev and his rebels could nowadays be interpreted as a sign of defiance towards the Russian state. [17]

In the main part of the text, we are going to see how Muslim pilgrimage draws these bygone eras and events back into the present moment. Here, it is mostly the above-mentioned image of the golden age that re-emerges and manifests itself in the surrounding. The pilgrims not only refer to those periods in an abstract sense but engage in a process that erases the line of demarcation between multiple pasts and presents. This is why—one may extend the argument—we are, in the case of this particular local pilgrimage, just as in certain other contexts, no longer only concerned with identity politics but also with a politics of reality.¹⁵ One does become familiar with yet another aspect of history and culture that is missing in the larger picture, but the reality that takes shape differs so fundamentally from the conditions we usually accept as facts of life that one might as well abandon the first picture entirely and instead focus on a new picture in an unfamiliar frame. The Muslim pilgrims considered in this article conceive of themselves as subjects in an environment characterised by the presence of the divine as well as miraculous intervention. For the sociologist and philosopher Martin Savransky (2012, 359), a politics of reality, which he also calls ontopolitics, goes beyond representing the world, as it is furthermore involved in its formation. Turning from epistemology and representation to ontology and reality, Savransky believes, can be a way to explore different worlds instead of only reflecting upon different worldviews (Savransky 2017, 21–22). Other scholars, who, like Savransky, sympathise with the decolonial critique of a science tradition developed in Europe, have been engaged in the project of theorising world-making as a mode of politics (Blaser and Cadena 2018). In the field of heritage studies, both the politics and the aesthetics of world-making have become objects of research (Port and Meyer 2018). Relying upon the limited means of a journal article written in academic language, I will attempt to delineate the formative and transformative effect of Muslim religious practice in the Russian Urals. And building on the above, it seems appropriate to place this undertaking within the framework of an anthropology of emergence and becoming, where one tries to attune the senses to a world as it takes manifest form (Savransky 2017; Biehl and Locke 2010). [18]

15 For examples from Kazakhstan of local pilgrimage and the alteration of a shared sense of reality, see Dubuisson / Genina (2012) and Bigozhin (2019).

The Mountains of Barda

In the following, we will be concerned with a local Muslim pilgrimage to places considered to be sacred because of the presence of living saints. Before going into more detail about the pilgrimage, let us first consider the *ghazis* (guardians or protectors), who confer special status to the sites they watch over and in whose honour the pilgrimage is undertaken. The legend of the seven *ghazis* is something I discovered on my very first visit to Barda in December 2015. I was taking a closer look at the prayer hall of the Friday mosque when the imam mukhtasib made me aware of gable-shaped ornaments on the three walls that do not contain the *mihrab* (prayer niche). These ornaments, he told me, stand for seven mountains located in the area, which are in turn associated with seven holy men. The mountains demarcate the territory, while the holy men protect it from exterior threat. During the process of mosque construction, the imam admits, he and the other members of the community thought about indicating the link between mountains and holy men on the walls of the prayer hall, but they eventually decided against it as they were building a mosque after all. [19]

In his book, Fatyhov (2008, 60) recounts the legend of the seven guardians in much the same way as it is told today by residents of Barda.¹⁶ They were originally considered *batyr* (heroes), protecting the territory of the Gaina. Serving as lookouts on the seven mountains, the first one detecting some suspicious movement would light a fire and the others would follow suit. In reaction to the fire in the mountains, the inhabitants of the villages in the valley grabbed their weapons, leapt onto the saddles of their horses, and gathered at an agreed-upon place to deflect the impending attack. Even though we are not provided with information about who threatened the ancestors of the people of Barda, Fatyhov remarks that the *ghazis* guarded the northeastern borders of Volga Bulgaria, so they were not simply concerned about their own property but played an important protective role for the realm. [20]

But as we are going to see, the role of the seven *ghazis* is not restricted to history alone. Instead, it appears that they began to be considered holy men in time and are now venerated by a fragment of the population. Saint veneration, even if frowned upon by adherents of religious reformism, is one aspect of Muslim culture to be found in almost any country with a sizable Muslim population.¹⁷ One may associate it with religious practices common within Sufi brotherhoods that tend to stress the absolute moral authority of the Sufi sheikh. Typically, Muslim pilgrims will pay their respects at the mausoleum or grave of the saint, but they may also seek supernatural assistance at a mountain spring, a tree, or a cave associated with him. During their lifetime, saints spread the message of God, they were Islamic scholars or simply pious individuals, and female saints are also not unheard of. Once in winter 2015 and then again in summer 2016, I had the chance to take part in local pilgrimages, and while the first one consisted of visits to Muslim cemeteries and a mausoleum, the second one took us to six of the seven mountains.¹⁸ Indicating the composition of the two groups is no easy task, as the number of pilgrims fluctuated over the course of the day, but one may estimate that the first group consisted of six men aged 19 to 75 and the second group of five men aged 23 to 65. During the first pilgrimage through a winter landscape, our guide kept on returning to the discussion of the seven guardians by mentioning, for instance, that [21]

16 Allen Frank (2001, 38) also briefly describes the case, relying on the Tatar language version of Fatyhov's book.

17 For examples from the Volga-Urals, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia, see Frank (1996), Grant (2011), and Sartori (2019), respectively.

18 The one mountain we do not visit is located too far in the distance to undertake the journey.



Figure 2 Visual reference to the seven mountains in the prayer hall of Barda's Friday mosque. Photo: Jesko Schmoller, 2015.

in the past people used to pray to a different of these holy men on each day of the week. The *ghazis* nonetheless played no major role in the event, which was very different on the second occasion, when we visited the mountains where they conducted their service and are now remembered and venerated. These mountains are called Sultan-galib, Khasan-shaikh, Sultan-Akhmet, Minlimagasum, Murat-khuzya, and Sultangali-gaziz, while we did not get to see the mountain Sait-Salim.¹⁹ The shift from a perception of the guardians as heroes to a perception of them as saints also becomes apparent from the terminology people revert to. Our guide on both pilgrimages, whose interpretation of Islam may be considered Sufi Muslim, called the *ghazis* sultans, a term that usually designates the spiritual successor of a Muslim saint. Fatyhov (2008, 62) likewise mentions an old manuscript listing the last living sultans: Bayazit Pastamyy, Khuzya-Akhmet Yasavi, Ibragim Adgam, Ismagil' Samani, Mukhamet Gaznavi, Mukhamet Khasravani, and Fayzir Mazi. As Fatyhov (2008, 63) writes, the legend of the seven guardians leads us right into the glory days of the kingdom of Volga Bulgaria and the Gaina people watching its borders.

Most certainly, it is no coincidence that the protectors of this specific territory are referred to as *ghazis*. In world history, *ghazis* have become known as military professionals fighting for Islam. According to historian Marshall Hodgson (1974, 2:582), a *ghazi* is a “warrior for the faith” who carries out *jihad*. As a literal translation for the term *ghazi*, Wolper (2013, 160) suggests “one who engages in raids against infidels.” Both the medieval Ghaznavid and Seljuk states relied on *ghazi* troops for their expansion and the battle against unbelievers in South Asia and Anatolia, respectively (Hodgson 1974, 2:42, 274–75; Rahimi 2004, 87). Hodgson (1974, 2:424–28) thinks of the early Ottoman realm, characterised as militantly Islamic, that by the late fourteenth century had successfully conquered all of Anatolia as a *ghazi* state. With further nuance, Rahimi (2004, 90) designates early Ottoman rule a frontier-chieftaincy and its distinct blend of military and religious principles a “Sufi-knightly culture of honorific ethos.” Curiously, the idea of a violent struggle for one’s religious belief seems to have been preserved in the shape of these guardians, who are still being venerated in the south of Perm Krai today. Such legacy should perhaps not be surprising, given the fact that in the tenth century and afterwards Volga Bulgaria constituted a major centre of Islamisation for the wider region (Hodgson 1974, 2:272). [22]

While the secularly- and reformist-minded inhabitants of Barda may not bother about the *ghazis*, the devotion of Muslim pilgrims nonetheless contributes to evoking the powerful image of the frontier. The administrative district is located in a historical and cultural border zone, where the different denominations have co-existed in complex configurations over centuries. One gains the impression that at least some of the people perceive of themselves as continuing to live in a frontier space that requires an effort to protect their customs. In Barda and elsewhere in the Urals, I have encountered the use of the term *jihad* not in the above predatory sense but rather as a mode of defence against assimilation that may result in the dilution or possibly extinction of one’s religious culture, often in reference to repression in Soviet times. The seven *ghazis* must be interpreted, I think, as a prospect of safety in volatile circumstances. They ensure the area’s spatial and cultural integrity that people would like to see restored. [23]

Next, I will attempt to demonstrate how moving through the territory for religious purposes once more opens a gate to a world that, according to the prevailing narrative, has come to an [24]

19 The Muslims I travel with use names that in some cases slightly divert from those in the book by Fatyhov: Sultangali, Xäsän Shayex, Sultanaxmet, Miniyar Magasum, Murat Xadshi, Sultangaziz and SaitSalim.

end. From the ethnographic accounts in the rest of this section, we may gain an idea of how lived religion has a direct effect on the environment and helps to manifest a community's outlook. Whereas one might assume that the south of Perm Krai is a peripheral spot on the map of Russia, far away from the political centre, Moscow, that since 2000 has increasingly claimed authority over the regions in various matters, but also removed from regional centres such as Yekaterinburg, practising Muslims in Barda identify different reference points for the story they tell, and in their story Barda is recognised as central. Instead of tuning in to the reality presented to them on the many TV channels loyal to the state administration, with its patriotic message to the population, and instead of adopting mainstream Russian culture with its own standards of virtue or amusement, they walk the paths that native residents from the area have taken for generations. By doing what their ancestors used to do, praying at mountain slopes and fetching water at holy springs, they conjure a counter-reality with the potential to replace the dominant picture. From a Russian Orthodox perspective, engaging in a local pilgrimage would still be a reasonable activity, even though the church recognises other saints than the Muslim ones, and the territories associated with those saints are likewise usually not the same. Compared with a Muslim spiritual geography of Russia, the Orthodox Christian variant would therefore produce an entirely different map of significant sites and routes to travel on. But even harsher is the clash with a more secular interpretation of the Russian environment. The world that becomes visible and tangible through the actions of Muslim believers is, after all, more than simply a different take on the shared "facts of life." In the other world, laws regulate our physical and spiritual existence that make little sense within the parameters established by Western European science. An example would be the flow of *baraka*, a spiritual force, the effect of which is experienced by the pilgrims. When arriving on the mountain Khasan-shaikh, our guide asked me whether I could also sense the particular energy of the place and whether it caused goosebumps on my skin. Over the course of the day, we absorbed *baraka*, and on our way home after nightfall our guide declared that he felt happy and full of spiritual energy. From a Western rationalist perspective, it would be difficult to accept a concept such as *baraka*, as it is not measurable with the devices of modern technology. And yet, *baraka* is one of the means bringing to life what lies in the distant past or used to be only legend.

The same is true for the seven *ghazis* themselves. Whereas sceptics consider them characters in a story alone and at best historical figures that have long passed away, our Muslim pilgrims regard them as very much alive and seek encounters with them. I was informed that the guardians continue to protect the territory and watch over its population, as they did several centuries ago. On the way to Sultan-galib, our guide explained how to properly interact with the saints, which is also the precondition for receiving *baraka*. Each place, according to him, is looked after by a saint and we must be respectful towards them and careful not to provoke a conflict. This applies to Barda and every other place on the planet. Therefore, the guide elaborated, we pray to each of the guardians in their respective locations, ask for a successful journey, and wish them all best. Time has no effect on them and they will stay with us until the end of days, he said. Here, it seems appropriate to quote an informant from the Naqshbandi-Mujaddidi brotherhood in Ufa, who said in a conversation about the saints and other teachers of humanity that we must realise how our assumptions are all wrong: in fact, it is us who are dead and they who are alive.²⁰ To be able to recognise these circumstances, the Sufi brother explained, it is necessary for us to open our eyes and truly see. It should be added that the

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20 For the context of this conversation, see Schmoller (2020).

guardians are not limited in their abilities as mere humans tend to be. For them, moving from one mountain to the next cannot be regarded a serious obstacle, our guide revealed, as they are able to fly through the air.

The world taking shape around the pilgrims is one of wonder and miracles (*karamat*). To make a video recording of the surroundings, they brought a drone with them, and as we watched the landscape as seen from above, our guide asked me whether I could see the Arabic letters for the word “Allah” written into the mountainside. Here, the transformation of space occurred before our eyes, as the other world is literally inscribed in the landscape. It was not referenced in an abstract manner but became physically apparent in that particular location, and challenged a purely rational perception of the world we live in. In the afternoon, our guide reported a second miracle. Just on the day of our pilgrimage, a baby was born in Barda and we were to expect the sacrifice of a sheep and a banquet at the mosque in the evening. [26]

It is not only by climbing up mountain slopes or by reciting surahs from the Quran that the other world becomes visible and tangible. Objects of material culture are involved in this process and these objects often relate to places and people that do not turn up in the official discourse. During the first tour of Muslim holy sites around Barda, one of the pilgrims listened to a recorded sermon of the Turkish sheikh at-Huseyni, who enjoys much popularity among Muslims in Perm Krai.²¹ He lent me his earphones and I found that the audio recording gave a wholly different atmosphere to the experience of sacred space. With the melodic vocals in the background, it seemed as if another context was established to interpret the landscape before my eyes. Then, he presented me with a photo of the Sufi sheikh and suggested that I carry it around in my wallet, so it would protect me wherever I went. On the day before the second pilgrimage, I sat at a coffee shop with another young Muslim who had just returned from a visit to the sheikh’s place of residence in Turkey, and when seeing the photo in my wallet was so overcome with joy that he gave me a small candy wrapped in plastic foil. Just as the above audio recording and the photo, the candy would enable me to receive the *baraka* of the master. In the evening, this young Muslim got to meet some of the other community members that planned to come along on the pilgrimage and he distributed candies among them. They also showed much interest in a fragrance called *misk* that was blessed by at-Huseyni and which I was supposed to rub into my eyebrows.²² When undertaking our tour of the area’s mountains the next day, the pilgrims made out a direct relation between those objects and the success of our journey. Our guide said that the candy he ate the previous evening may have been a precondition for our entire pious undertaking. On Sultan-galib, we noticed a pleasant breeze that one of our companions interpreted as another one of God’s gifts. At-Huseyni was included in the prayer in this particular place, as the tour may have taken a different turn without the blessed candies. By activating our senses, hearing, sight, taste, and smell, the objects described here helped to materialise the other world that at first resembled only an idea. In this other world, one must assume, a Sufi master from Turkey is of more relevance than the mayor of Barda or the governor of Perm. And again, these objects have properties one would not expect to discover in Russian everyday life. [27]

Even though the world that assumed its form before our eyes conformed in many respects to the golden age of Turkic Muslim rule, an awareness of other periods was likewise noticeable among the pilgrims. Once more, the idea of the frontier was evident in their accounts [28]

21 See Nazli Alimen (2018) for more information on the Menzil brotherhood, whose headquarters are located in the vicinity of the Turkish-Syrian border.

22 For more information on the use of fragrance as part of Muslim religious practice, see Schmoller (2021).



Figure 3 A view of Sultan-galib. Photo: Jesko Schmoller, 2016.

and indications of cultural contact and minority resilience. Until the beginning of the age of empire, when Russia started to invade foreign territory, the ancestors of the residents of Barda lived by the river Kama, where it was not necessary to cultivate the land for agricultural purposes (Fatyhov 2008, 69). But when Russian settlers arrived in the area, their ancestors were prohibited to further live on the banks of the river—on the ground of their forefathers, as Faytkhov stresses—and were instead driven into the forests and mountains to settle in more difficult terrain. Since these were the times of forced conversion to Christianity, many Muslims not only lost their land but their way of life as well.²³ Fatyhov (2008, 60) speculates that some of the village dwellers further withdrew into the forests in order to keep their traditions alive. During the pilgrimage, one gained the impression that the Muslim pilgrims felt intimately familiar with the landscape of Barda, where their ancestors preserved their religious beliefs and practices in secret. If this is where, against all odds, it was possible to keep the Islamic tradition alive, why would one abandon it now? Every once in a while, the armed resistance of the local population against the state turned up as a subject. On one occasion, we stopped at a crossroads and, pointing to one of the roads, a pilgrim informed me that two-and-a-half centuries back, Salavat Yulaev was marching north with his troops from there to attack the stronghold of Osa. History-conscious inhabitants of the area consider the rebellion of Pugachev and Salavat Yulaev's participation in it legitimate measures to regain what used to be theirs. By moving with a particular purpose through the familiar environment, this aspect of history provides an alternative frame to interpret and experience the land. In contrast to the seven *ghazis*, no one expects to suddenly encounter Pugachev or one of his rebel troops. But once again, the territory becomes a place of resistance, where people claim their own tradition, just as Tatar-language Barda resists the dominance of the Russian language. In conversations with local Muslims, the struggle for the preservation of one's heritage, if religious or not, can become suddenly perceptible. In summer 2016, I was getting ready to use the *banya* (sauna) of one of the imams who also took part in the first pilgrimage, and while he tied the birch rods meant to stimulate the circulation of blood in the body, he reflected about the origins of the *banya*. Is it not strange, he asked, that everyone speaks of the "Russian *banya*" now, even though it was originally a Muslim invention? Both the "Russian *pel'meni*" (dumplings) and the "Russian forest" have the same origins, he added. A sense of loss is apparent in this narrative of cultural appropriation. Having lost their land, the local inhabitants came under the influence of a foreign empire where they had no choice but to submit to the state's nationality politics and Russian cultural hegemony. It is before this background that Muslims from Barda strive to restore a lived Muslim culture.

Conclusion

A religious pilgrimage may be motivated by a variety of reasons, co-existing with one another. In this article with a focus on the Russian Urals, we have taken a closer look at one of them: the negotiation of history and culture. It turns out that the interactions of inhabitants of Barda with the local environment are informed by notions of homeland and heritage that differ in content—if not necessarily in form—from perspectives consistent with the sense of a new Russian national identity. Volga Bulgaria emerges as a state that protects its subjects from foreign invasion and the corruption of their culture. Muslims of vernacular outlook from the area around Barda venerate guardians of the territory, who are known as *ghazis*. The figure of

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23 On the matter of conversion in Russian history, see Kefeli (2014).

the *ghazi* conveys associations of the frontier, as the land of the ancestors of the local inhabitants was located in a border zone. Two ideas, Islam and warfare, are combined in the *ghazi*, whose duty it is to protect the faith. In reference to the rebellion of Pugachev, we recognise Barda once more as a place of resistance. But while in the past violent struggles ensued over control of the land, people are now rather engaged in finding the right interpretive frames for how to perceive their history and culture. Because their reference points contrast with those of the ethnic Russian majority population, they help to place Barda in another conceptual cosmos.

Both Muslim believers' connection to the land and their sense of belonging to a larger community indicates a concern with tradition whose perception undergoes changes in circumstances of contact with mainstream society. After a period where the Russian population grappled with being exposed to the harsh climate of a new economy and where some mourned the decay of the Soviet Union, a certain consensus has been reached as to what constitutes Russian heritage and tradition. The official interpretation of tradition is not challenged in principle by members of the Muslim minority; it is rather confronted with an alternative tradition. One reaction of ethnic Tatars and Bashkirs to increasingly formal structures in the composition of Russian history and culture would be another configuration of the major historic events and the people who helped inform Muslim minority culture in its current manifestations. The assumed integrity of Volga Bulgaria might be a response to an integrity now claimed by Russian nationalists at the expense of any Muslim contributions to Russian culture. In that case, the consolidation of tradition on the one side could also cause a consolidation of tradition on the other side. [30]

The Muslims that undertake the pilgrimage to the seven mountains of Barda are not claiming autonomy for the space in question. Instead, they claim a bit of space to live their lives in accordance with religious prescriptions. They wish to be granted the authority to interpret reality in compliance with their beliefs, which may be understood as a political claim after all. By treading the paths of their ancestors, Muslim pilgrims transform their surroundings and turn them into an ideal place. A land resembling the kingdom of Volga Bulgaria emerges from oblivion, where members of the Muslim minority find refuge and conditions of integrity. With the administrative vocabulary at hand, it would be impossible to categorise this realm, and one is unable to grasp what goes on there when relying on nothing but a rational mind. The guardians, we must be aware, are not simply metaphors, but they *do* protect the place from misfortune. The flow of *baraka* brings to life the landscapes of the dead, and a pilgrim may feel the loving gaze of a Muslim saint upon him and be taken into his care. Muslim believers from the Urals with a vernacular conception of Islam are convinced that in the material world all matter comes to waste, while the saints enjoy an eternal existence in the other world, which, as we have seen, can be inscribed in the landscape. By erasing the line of demarcation between this world and the next, between present and past, the pilgrims once more conduct a journey through the homeland that was lost to a temporal power with little understanding for their traditional ways of life. [31]

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