Becoming Muslim in Imperial Russia

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Becoming Muslim in Imperial Russia: Conversion, Apostasy, and Literacy.

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Chapter Two

Popular Knowledge of Islam on the Volga Frontier

In addition to playing an important role in the spread of the apostate movement, Islamic knowledge, both oral and written, provided an important tool for baptized Tatars to understand the universe and their place in it. The principal agent of Tatars’ spiritual conquest among starokreshchenye and novokreshchenye was “popular Islam.” This was an Islam understood, lived, and spread by ordinary peasants, artisans, or traders who had spent time at the primary Qur’anic school or who had heard the image-filled sermons of itinerant Sufis. This Islam combated the attachment of the Volga peasants to their ancestral animism, drew a sharp line between Christianity and Islam, and prepared the hearers to take the quest for the truth into the madrasas of Bukhara and Samarkand. Popular Islamic discourse always appealed to the written word as the ultimate guarantee of its authority. It thus contributed to the introduction of literacy into the villages and encouraged animists and Christian Tatars to become familiar with Islamic teaching and writings. These men and women then became the leaders of ever larger movements of collective apostasy. By incorporating new villages in the Dar al-Islam, or the house of God, they triumphed over the assimilationist policy of the infidel Russians and strengthened the Tatar Muslim identity. These victories prompted Orthodox missionaries of the 1860s to promote aspects of Eastern Orthodox spirituality that could match the popular understanding of the afterlife as expressed in the context of the apostasies to Islam.

An analysis of popular Islamic discourse and knowledge among the Christian Tatars and their proselytizers permits us to evaluate the religious culture of the Tatar Muslim peasantry, appreciate its methods of defense against the Russian state, define the cultural and economic networks that connected the Christian Tatars to the Muslim world, and finally reveal the ways literacy spread in the Middle Volga. Although the state and the church interfered in the baptized Tatars’ practice of Islam, “baptized” Islam was no less “Muslim” than “Tatar” Islam. Paradoxically, Tatar reformers of the late nineteenth century rejected this popular expression of Islam, despite its success in preserving and extending the Muslim community. Like the Russian Orthodox missionaries, they regarded popular Islam as pure superstition. Above all, they held it responsible for Western Islamophobic attacks and for Muslim misinterpretations.

1. For a different perspective, see Aleksandr Kobzev’s work on the new converts of Simbirsk province, Islamskaiia obshchina Simbirskoi gubernii vo vtoroi polovine XIX–nachala XX vv.: Monografiia (Nizhnii Novgorod, 2007). Kobzev argues that since the new converts of Simbirsk province did not have full access to Islamic knowledge, their Islam was not as “orthodox” as their Muslim brethrens, who could freely and uninterruptedly attend the mosque and benefit from their mullahs’ advice and teachings.
of the Qur’an, without seeing it as a veritable Islamic code of life conditioned by the religious environment of the Volga countryside and as a precursor of their own reforms. Nevertheless, the reformists’ critical reading of popular knowledge of Islam did not keep their publishing houses from disseminating the literary foundations of the knowledge that they sought to change.

Apostates, both men and women, used scriptural tools to imagine their universe and resist the imposition by Russian missionaries of a cultural code alien to them, and incorporated the written word into their oral culture. This chapter demonstrates that the apostate Kräshens and their Tatar neighbors’ knowledge of Islam had a scriptural basis imbedded in Sufism, which constituted a model of action for men and women in an environment hostile to the expansion of Islam. The literary, visual, and oral foundations of popular Muslim Tatar discourse—sacred images, talismans, books, songs, legends surrounding sacred places—provided a repertoire of metaphors and edifying stories that apostates and Tatars used to answer for their faith in everyday encounters with non-Muslims and Christian missionaries.

Oral and Written Sources of Islamization

Signing a petition to be recognized legally as Muslims was the final stage in a long process of Islamization of the Orthodox Christian Tatars and their animist neighbors, a process that would have been impossible without cultural networks that connected them to the Tatar Muslim community. Islamization began orally, at the family table, between parents and children, older and younger siblings, at the market place or eating houses (kharchevnia in Russian), and during major religious festivals between neighbors of various ethnic origins and occupational backgrounds. Originally, the “book” of popular Islam consisted of stories taken from the Qur’an, the hadith (the “traditions” about the practices and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad transmitted through a chain of authorities), Sufi inspired tales of the prophets, chanted prayers, mural images, and legends surrounding sacred places. It was an Islam based on mystical literature that sought to define itself against its closest competitors—Christianity and indigenous beliefs.

Most of the stories were recorded by traveling native Christian missionaries and teachers, such as the Kräshens Vasili Timofeev from Nikiforova village, Mamadysh district, and Stefan Matveev (b. 1879) from Menzelinsk district, Ufa province, the Mari Petr Eruslanov, Russian orientalists and pedagogues including Nikolai Il’minskii, Evfimii Malov, Mikhail Mashanov (1852–1924), and Sofia Chicherina (1862–1921), and the Hungarian linguist Gábor Bálint (1844–1913). Ethnographers were more interested in the animist side of the old convert cosmology or Islamic practices among the Muslim Tatars, but they rarely examined Islamic beliefs among the baptized Tatars. Orthodox missionaries, threatened by Islamic proselytism, were more sensitive to the different levels of Islamization among the Kräshens, but they recorded few stories and even eliminated from their diaries those that they considered too extravagant—not only because of their Christian bias but also because they judged them to be heterodox from an Islamic point of view. Despite the scarcity of sources

and their partiality, it is possible to reconstruct the Kräshens’ Islamic worldview just by taking the so-called superstitious stories seriously and reestablishing their Islamic meaning. This can be done by retracing the literary Sufi origins of the Tatar missionary discourse and looking at the books that were known to the apostate Kräshens in the nineteenth century, as reflected in Russian missionary sources. Some of these pre-revolutionary books mentioned in Christian missionary diaries survived the antireligious campaigns of the 1930s and the academic expeditions of the 1960s and 1970s, and can still be found in the villages of former apostates in the Kukmor and Bogatye Saby (Baylar Sabası) regions in either manuscript or printed form.

Entering the Volga from Central Asia, Sufi teachers of the Yasawiyya and Naqshbandiyya orders had introduced many important popular religious texts to the local population from the twelfth century on. Both orders, well known for their use of native languages as a tool of conversion and their flexibility toward local customs, played an important role in the conversion to Islam of Mongol and Turkic tribes in Eurasia. These epics and poems reflected earlier encounters between Islam, Christianity, and shamanism in Eurasia and Central Asia in the fourteenth century. Muslim missionaries of different ethnic backgrounds reappropriated these works to construct normative models for dealing with their Russian overlords in the nineteenth century. Analyses of these texts—and the ways in which they were used—offer more than a view of peasant Tatars’ knowledge of Islam in nineteenth-century rural central Russia. They also provide another perspective on popular imagined worlds created through storytelling, and reveal a particular thaumaturgical understanding of Islam that persists today in Tatarstan.

Myths, Objects, and Literature as Sources of Islamic Knowledge

A conversion myth, known to Tatars and Kräshens of nineteenth-century Mamadysh district, lamented that Ivan the Terrible had locked Tatars in an overheated muncha (steam bath) to force them to accept baptism.3 By contrast, oral and written narratives of the Bolghars’ Islamization emphasized healing, fecundity, and knowledge. According to tradition, Tuy Bikä, the daughter of the Bolghar king Aydar, was miraculously cured of her paralysis in the muncha by three companions of the Prophet Muhammad. Because the companions arrived in winter, the birch trees were bare of their healing leaves, so the three men used the gifts the Prophet gave them before their departure—a staff, an inkwell, and a turban. They placed the staff in the inkwell—a clearly phallic image—and an enormous birch tree sprouted from the inkwell; next they made whisks from the tree and used them to brush the king’s daughter, who was healed. Her father, in gratitude, embraced Islam.4

Whereas the Christianization story emphasized death, forceful conversion, and spiritual emptiness, the Islamization narrative stressed bodily purification

and fertility. By inserting the staff into the inkwell, the companions symbolically connected the Bolghars to the time when the first Pen inscribed God’s Word on the divine Tablets and contractually sealed the Bolghar people to the Prophet’s community. The birch tree reaching the skies was reminiscent of two mythical trees in Islamic cosmology: the Tree of Certainty (shajarat al-yaqin), which held the Light of Muhammad from where God created the whole universe, and the Tree of Life in paradise, a symbol of the good and a promise of eternal bliss. Its presence in the Volga-Ural region and especially on women’s tombs constituted a powerful reminder of the time when the Bolghar land adopted Islam and was impregnated with the Prophet’s knowledge. Legends claimed that the Khan Aydar’s daughter married one of the companions and became an itinerant teacher of the law.5

The conversion myth of the Bolghar land was the central piece of a popular history of the first Muslim state in the Volga-Ural region, Tāwārīkh-i Bolghāriyya. Although attributed to the sixteenth-century author Husam ad-Din b. Shāraf ad-Din al-Bolghari, the work was probably composed much later, in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. In the context of the apostasy movement, his book’s shrine catalogue constituted a “missionizing map” for bringing baptized Tatars to Islam. It included the tombs of taba‘at-tabi‘in (followers of the followers of the Prophet Muhammad) in the very large baptized communities of Melekes in Krugloe parish and Bol’shie Aty, Verkhnie Chelny and Aksarino in Lebiazh’e parish, Menzelinsk district, Ufa province—indicating that these communities—initially composed of mid-seventeenth-century migrants from baptized villages along the Ziuri and Arsk roads in the Kazan and Mamadysh districts—belonged to the sacred territory of Bolghar Islam. These villages were composed mostly of starokreshchenye, Muslims, and Finno-Ugric peoples, who built the Trans-Kama fortified lines at the heart of the former Bolghar kingdom from the seventeenth century on. Except for Samigulov’s native village Tubilghïtaw (Verkhniaia Nikitkina), which apostatized in the 1820s, the other villages cited by Husam ad-Din al-Bolghari, including Baigulovo and Baidankino in the Zay Valley, remain Kräshen. The chronicler’s list of shrines included the names—fabricated or real—of followers of the Prophet after whom the villages were named, implying that these villages were—or would soon become—Muslim. Despite the presence of a small number of apostates in their midst, the communities of Melekes and Aty welcomed the construction of churches in 1888 and 1890, after Il’minskii’s reform of Eastern Orthodox literacy in native languages contested and transformed Husam ad-Din’s “imagined” religious topography.6


Muslim proselytizers of baptized and Tatar origin—Sufi shaykhs, female teachers, and seasonal workers—knew of Husam ad-Din's work, which was the most widely read history in the Middle Volga in the nineteenth century, and believed that the “lost” Kräshens could be reconnected to the power of God through the dissemination of Islamic knowledge. This knowledge took oral, written, and topographical forms. It included *shama’il* (sacred illustrations with Arabic text), talismans, and books, often printed by the University of Kazan as well as manuscripts and tombstone inscriptions.

During the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), the missionary and amateur ethnographer Sofiia Chicherina found *shama’il* in Kazan province apostate homes in places where icons were supposed to hang. These Islamic drawings, sold at village markets, appeared in the Middle Volga at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The most popular ones among Tatars were images of the Ka'ba (the cubic building that stands in the center of the Grand Mosque of Mecca) or objects said to belong to the Prophet Muhammad, in particular the sandals he wore when ascending to heaven. Another popular *shama’il* was the Möher-i Shärif (the sacred seal) whose original drawing was composed in the nineteenth century by Haji Shams ad-Din b. Hösäyen, a Tatar from Nizhniaia Kursa in the region of Arsk, Kazan province, where many baptized villages were located. The drawing consisted of five circles, a large one in the center and four smaller ones in each corner, with the names of Hasan and Husayn—the martyred grandchildren of the Prophet—at the epicenter of one of the circles. The Elyshevites placed it on the chest of a deceased person to appease her torments in the tomb and ease her passage to bliss; its drawing reminded viewers of the solar system with its series of concentric circles, symbolizing the layers of heaven crossed by the Prophet Muhammad during his ascent (*mi’raj*). Tatars as well as apostates believed that after judgment the soul of each believer would travel through the same layers when ascending to God after death—emulating the Prophet Muhammad's midnight journey to heaven.

Other talismans contained Qur’anic verses. In Ufa province, the mullah of Biagitinovo, famed for his sanctity and healing powers, provided the Maris of two nearby cantons (*volost’*) with abbreviated Suras and prayers inspired by the Qur’an for protection against evil spirits. Many descendants of apostate tailors in the Mamadysh and Kukmor regions have kept talismans (*doghaliq-bötilär*) that belonged to their fathers and grandfathers. One tailor in Elyshevo wore a necklace, with four small leather pockets containing prayers; another, from Ianyli village, kept the book of *Ism-i Ä’zam* (The Great Names of God), near his heart while traveling and sowing in Tatar villages. The book’s introduction assured its owner that the angel Gabriel had promised Muhammad that reading—or even carrying—the names of God would absolve all sins.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, missionaries also noted that Mamadysh district’s tailors eagerly bought Islamic books. These books can still be found in

8. Gölsinä Khämidullina’s private collection, Elyshevo. According to Il’minskii’s statistics this *shama’il* was printed every year in impressive quantities, see *Kazanskaia tsentral’naia*, 113; Rustem Shamsutov, *Slovo i obraz v tatarskom shamaile ot proshlogo do nastoiaischeho* (Kazan, 2003), 98, 178.
the homes of former apostate families in Elyshevo and Ianyli villages. They included manuscript collections of munajat (spiritual songs) related to the End of Times and jadid publications of traditional Sufi literature. Yet, even when villagers did not possess such books, they regarded them with respect and were often familiar with their contents. Tatars and Kräshens, literate or not, often affirmed that there were many more Tatar than Russian books. Muslim literature also appeared during funerals when a mullah or a literate Kräshen secretly read or recited the Yā Sīn, the thirty-sixth Sura of the Qur’ān, which talks about death, Judgment Day, immortality, heaven, and hell. Yā Sīn is part of the Ḥāfi‘-i Yāk and its commentary, both of which the Russian missionary Evfimii Malov discovered in 1866 in the possession of apostate Elyshevite tailors and representatives. Usually, Tatar children learned to recite the Yā Sīn by heart by the end of the first year of Qur’ānic school.10

Popular knowledge of Islam among the Tatars and Kräshens consisted mainly of stories found in mystical poetry or their commentaries and histories of the prophets. These stories were the subject of animated polemics between Russian missionaries, Kräshens, and their Muslim neighbors. Baptized Tatars, inclined to apostatize or not, knew about Adam, Eve, Abraham, Moses, and Solomon from the Qur’ānic tradition, which was sometimes strikingly different from the Hebraic-Christian traditions. Most popular was the tale of the biblical patriarch and Muslim prophet

10. NART, f. 4, op. 133, d. 7, l. 16; “Zapiska ob otpadenii kreshchenykh tatar ot khristianstva v islam, sostavlenaia na osnove dokumentov arkhiva Kazanskoi dukhovnoi konsistorii (2 February 1849),” in Khristianskoe prosveshchenie, 60; Tajetdin bin Mulla Yakhshiqol Ashtäki, Ḥāfi‘yāk shārīf tāfsire (Berenche tapqı́r Kazan universiteti tipografiyası́ndə 1848 yilda basıldı́) (Kazan, 2003), 12–54; Validov, Ocherk, 16.
Joseph, son of Jacob, as recited in *Qīṣṣa-yi Yūsuf* (Tale of Joseph), a mystical poem written by the Bolghar Qol ‘Ali (b. 1172), and recorded in the Transoxanian *Stories of the Prophets (Qīṣṣā al-Anbiyā’)* by the fourteenth-century judge Nasir ad-Din ar-Rabghuzi. *Qīṣṣa-yi Yūsuf*, also called “the Book of Joseph” (*Yosīf kitabī*), was so well known among the Krāshens and so cheap to buy that Aleksandr Miropol’skii, a Russian archpriest in the baptized village of Apazovo and a diocesan missionary after 1891, suggested writing a small brochure in vernacular Tatar, to be distributed freely, that would contrast the biblical “truths” about Patriarch Joseph against the Qur’anic distortions of his story.¹¹

Indeed, Joseph’s story was most popular among Muslims, baptized Tatars, and their Russian neighbors. It had all the ingredients of an adventure novel: family betrayal, exile in a foreign land, sexual temptation, sorcery, premonitory dreams, ambition, and final victory over evil. A common script could be drawn from the Bible and the Qur’an: Joseph enjoyed a special place in his father’s heart; out of jealousy, his older brothers sold him into slavery. The pharaoh’s courtier and chief steward Potiphar bought him, and Potiphar’s wife—unnamed in the Bible and the Qur’an but known as Zulaykha in Turkic poetry—attempted to seduce him. Joseph’s resistance enraged Potiphar’s wife so much that she denounced him to her husband, who threw Joseph into prison. Thanks to his ability to interpret dreams, Joseph attracted the pharaoh’s attention and was raised to power. Such was the basic narrative that all could agree on, but for Eastern Orthodox Christians and Muslims it had different meanings, and for Krāshens and apostates, it became the hermeneutical locus for the further development and crystallization of their religious identity, be it Orthodox or Islamic.¹² For Christians, the Joseph of Genesis was an archetype of Jesus—both were tempted and falsely accused, and both saved their people. However for Muslims, Joseph was an archetype of the Prophet Muhammad: both were orphaned early and exiled; both brought the true faith to pagan polytheists; both had to struggle to be recognized as prophets; both became rulers of great nations; and both were known for their incredible beauty. In the book of Genesis and Russian folk religious songs, Joseph refused to go to bed with his master’s wife of his own free will, but in the Qur’an he escaped sin only through divine intervention.¹³ Muslim exegetes argued that Joseph was actually attracted to Potiphar’s wife, whose beauty was second only to his own. Had he not seen the figure of his father, Joseph would have succumbed to


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her charms. While Christian interpreters emphasized Joseph’s chastity as parallel to that of Jesus, Turkic authors underscored Joseph’s manliness as a parallel to the Prophet Muhammad’s love for women. “Three things from your world have been made pleasant unto me,” said the Prophet, “perfume, and women, and ritual prayer.” The same hadith was quoted by the great Andalusian philosopher Muhyi ad-Din Ibn al-‘Arabi (1165–1240) in The Meccan Revelations to prove that women were not obstacles on God’s path; on the contrary, they could lead to God. In other words, loving women was equated to loving God.

Apostates were convinced that the Tatars had the best version. Miropol’skii’s projected brochure was meant to denounce the Islamic deviations from the biblical account to guard Kräshens from Muslim influence, especially in Mamadysh, Laishevo, and Kazan districts, which he visited often as part of his mission to stop further apostasies. Early Muslim commentators, among them the collectors of prophets’ tales Abu Ishaq Ahmad ath-Thalabi (d. 1036) or the nonidentifiable Muhammad b. ‘Abdul-lah al-Kisa’i (twelfth century?), had used the story of Joseph in a polemical manner to assert the superiority of the Qur’an over the Torah, quoting various prophetic traditions in support of the idea that God had revealed the complete version of Joseph to Muhammad alone as proof of his prophethood. Apostates fully shared their opinion.

Long before the spread of printing among the Tatars, the story of Joseph and other popular religious literature were available in written form. Permeated by Sufi symbolism and traditions, they were written in türki, a literary language close to Ottoman Turkish or Central Asian Chagatay Turkish, the literary language of Central Asia, occasionally reflecting local phonetic and grammatical peculiarities. These manuscripts and books, also found in Turkey, Central Asia, Afghanistan, and India, made the high tradition of Islamic knowledge available not only to peasants who had little exposure to Islamic schooling, but also to muezzins and future village mullahs. To Malov’s astonishment, Shakir Ähmäd—an unofficial Tatar mullah from Abla village—planned to go to Ufa and apply for the title of “official mullah” (ukaznoi mulla) despite his primitive knowledge of Arabic. The mullah replied that his grasp of religious books written in türki sufficed for the office, especially because his village was isolated and badly in need of an official mullah. These basic primers included key prayers and samples of the Qur’an in Arabic and Turkic languages. They also contained Sufi heroic tales and love stories in the form of poems, describing the lives and miraculous deeds of prophets, saints, padishahs, exemplary women, and martyrs of the faith.


17. After the conquest of Kazan in 1552, the Tatars, forced to move east, took their manuscripts with them and proselytized among the Bashkirs. Local copyists then bashkirized the language of these manuscripts and thus greatly facilitated the dissemination of Islamic beliefs. R. Ignat’ev, “Skazaniia, skazki i pesni, sikhranivshiesia v rukopisiakh tatarskoi pis’mennosti i v ustnykh peresakazakh u inorodtsev-magometan Orenburgskogo kraia,” Zapiski Orenburgskogo otdelia Imperatorskogo russkogo geograficheskogo obschestva (Orenburg, 1875), 3: 185.
Even an illiterate Tatar knew the content of these texts by heart as many of them were sung as munajat. The munajat, which literally means “word to Allah” in Arabic, sometimes translated as “intimate or private conversations,” “whispered prayers,” “prayers within the heart,” “inward supplication to God,” or “silent and fervent prayer,” were rhymed and chanted prayers that could be transmitted orally or in written form. Women of all ages, including apostate women, liked to copy them by hand in their personal diaries and, after performing their ablutions at the bathhouse and wearing their prettiest clothes, recite them orally, either at major commemorative religious holidays, or during the long winter evenings. Those spiritual hymns consisted of stanzas of different length, and in some cases, as in Bädäwām Kitābī (Forever, composed between the twelfth and eighteenth centuries), the same verse (usually a direct appeal to God) closed each stanza. Bashkirs and Kazakhs accompanied the chanting of Bädäwām with their qobuz, a two-string fiddle, and each time the singer repeated the refrain, the player struck the strings of his instrument more loudly. The munajat genre was quite flexible, personalizing religious teachings in the first person, telling stories about the prophets and sacred places, and integrating the works of different Sufi Turkic poets with variations of its own. Likewise, in Rabghūzī’s Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyā’ (Stories of the Prophets, 1310), each prophet’s cycle was introduced by versified eulogies that summarized the main deeds and events in the life of a prophet, and could be recited as spiritual songs. Thus, the munajat and other poems’ stereotypical meter and rhythm, whose authors and dates of composition were often unknown, helped peasants and young students to memorize the prophets’ deeds and the main tenets of Islam. As noted by Malov in the 1860s, starokreshchenye women of Apazovo village enjoyed listening to them and eagerly memorized their melodies and words.

Authors of popular religious books demonstrated a high level of education. Imam Jamal ad-Din Biktashi (1798–1873), who authored Fāżā’īl ash-Shūhūr (The Qualities of
of the Months)—a book later disparaged by modernist Tatars—was originally from Mämâshir village in Malmyzh district. He had a thorough, classical background in Islamic studies. After studying morphology and syntax in the Köyek madrasa, law in the Chistopol’ madrasa, and logic in the Maskara madrasa, which was well-known for its successful proselytism among the Udmurts, he became an imam at the village of Shadchi, in Ziuri volost’, Mamadysh district, an area predominantly inhabited by Tatars, Krâshens, and Maris.  

These compilers of religious books consciously aimed at teaching the basic duties of a Muslim in words comprehensible to the masses. They sought to reach illiterate villagers who had no access, time, or ability to read theological works in Arabic or Persian. Biktashi wrote Fâżâ’il ash-Shühûr in the 1840s to introduce his wife, who was not proficient in Arabic and Persian, to the meaning of the rituals. According to the Tatar pedagogue and encyclopedist ‘Abd al-Qayyum Nasîri (1758–1915), the Tatars of the merchant colony of Kargala near Orenburg asked a famous teacher from Khorezm, Ishniyaz b. Shirniyaz (d. 1790/91), to write a book in the Bolghar language about Islam. It is unlikely that Ishniyaz was the author of Sharâ’it al-Īmān, its language being Ottoman Turkish; yet Tatars of the nineteenth century understood the book as an attempt to instruct ritualized prayers in a language accessible to all. The primer contained instructions to perform the ritualized prayers and a versified Muslim creed in türki, and assured believers that they could perform funerary prayers in their native language if they could not recite them in Arabic.  

Likewise, the daughter of Taj ad-Din Yalchïghol (1767/68–1837), a Bashkir shaykh and musicologist known for his miracles and historical works, convinced her father to continue his family’s education by writing a clear commentary in the vernacular on the poetry of the famous Samarkandi Naqshbandi Sufi Allahiyar (d. 1723?). Such works in local languages greatly aided proselytism among animist and baptized Tatars whom Yalchïghol, also a Naqshbandi, visited and instructed, preparing the way for the modernists who advocated the use of the mother tongue.  

Religious Tatar literature was filled with Persian and Arabic words and was the product of educated elites who had studied in the madrasas of the Middle Volga and Central Asia. However, its morphology (in particular the nominal declensions, the verbal nouns in -u/ü and -ghan/gän, and the infinitive in -rgha/rgä), was of Qipchaq


origin, and its word order was close to modern spoken Tatar. Authors relied on direct speech (Allah, the prophets, or the angels spoke directly to the believers) and used apostrophes to address their listeners. There were archaic suffixes borrowed from Chaghatay and Oghuz languages, but once children knew their equivalents in vernacular Tatar, those suffixes did not constitute a major obstacle to understanding. The main novelty was the lexicon borrowed, for the most part, from Arabic. But even there, the lexicon was limited to the religious sphere. Practice of Islam at home and in the community—ablutions, basic prayers, and various forms of greeting—helped the believer to memorize those Arabic words at a very early age. Spiritual songs (munajat) also contained many arabisms, a large array of bookish expressions, the names of God and the prophets in Arabic, and samples of basic prayers. Compound formulas, which combined an Arabic or Persian word and its synonym in Tatar, eased the process of understanding religious texts even more. An explanation of the Arabic word in Tatar could also precede the actual word in Arabic. Finally, the repetition of vocabulary allowed children and adults to assimilate foreign words and use them in their everyday speech. One student in Kargala reported in his memoirs that after encountering an Arabic word three or four times, he could remember its meaning.

Symptomatically, the old convert milieu was far from being immune to the Arabization of its language. In the 1860s, the Islamized wife of a Kräshen in Nikiforova preferred to use the Arabic greeting “as-salamu ‘alaykum” (Peace be upon you) than the usual Tatar “äle isän mesez?” or “aru mïsiz?” (hello; literally, are you in good health?), and in the 1890s, the Kräshens of Apazovo occasionally talked about tawfik (accommodation to the will of God, divine guidance, or God’s making one successful). But, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the tailors of Elyshevo, who were the most exposed to Islam through their work, constantly used words of Arabic origin in their speech.

Not only did the writers of popular Islamic works compose in a language accessible to the peasants, but they also “turkified” the Qur’anic stories. Qol ‘Ali, the author of Qiïsï-yi Yūsuf, used metaphors from the old Turkic poetic tradition, in particular the ancient Oghuz epics that were popular at that time for retelling the story of Joseph. He also turkified Joseph, who wore braids, a Turkic custom, and alluded to the animist past of the Turkic peoples by including figures such as silver statues of bulls. In addition, he appealed to the climate and landscape of the Volga region when he described the realm of the pharaoh. For example, the caravan that led Joseph to Egypt was caught in a snow storm after the slave driver whipped him for going astray to his mother’s tomb. Furthermore, the author inserted Turkic names into the narrative: the name of the slave driver, who later repented for hitting...
ting Joseph, was Qïlïch (sword) and Joseph’s nephews bore Turkic and not Islamic names. These names—Dingez (sea), Qurt (wolf), Qan (blood), Arslan (lion)—unknown in the Qur’an, referred to Joseph’s ordeal and summarized his life in a way that made the twelfth Sura more familiar and easier to remember for the Tatar reader or listener.  

Finally, the text, which underwent many changes between the twelfth century and the time when the Sufi poet and theologian ‘Abd ar-Rähim al-Utïz Imäni (1754–1835) attempted to stabilize it, sought not only to convert “pagans,” but also to address an audience living in a predominantly animistic and Christian environment. When an idol recognized Joseph as God’s prophet, the ruler of Jerusalem became a believer and took off his zünnar—a rope girdle worn by Christians and also associated with animism. The same word zünnar was also used in Bädäwām to designate the tiny ropes or scarves Turkic or Finno-Ugric animists used to tie on sacred trees when they made a wish. In the Central Asian work of Rabghuzi, there was no allusion to taking off one’s belt at the time of conversion. Similarly, in the work of Sheyyad Hamza, a thirteenth-century wandering Anatolian dervish poet, the ruler of Jerusalem, convinced of the truth, destroyed his idol with a hammer and, in a sign of total submission and awe, adorned Joseph with his own belt (not zünnar, but qushaq). But in the context of the Volga region, taking off one’s belt was a definite sign of turning away from paganism as well as from Eastern Orthodoxy. Russian peasants wore belts at the waist while Tatars dressed in longer shirts without belts. At the sight of a priest, unbelted Islamized Kräshens who worked in the fields hastily used a cluster of compressed rye as belts; once the priest was gone, their improvised garment was quickly discarded. Likewise, after sending their petition to the emperor, starokreshchenye in Mamadysh district, emulating the ruler of Jerusalem, symbolically got rid of their belts to mark their entrance into the realm of Islam. Thus, Volga copyists and Utïz Imäni, who was known for proselytizing among the Kräshens and who grew up in his mother’s village, Staraia Kadeeva (Utïz Imän or “the thirty oak trees”) addressed an audience clearly exposed to Christianity. One of his poems rebuked a Grishka, probably a baptized Tatar, who agreed that Islam was the true faith but still could not


resist the call of church bells. Coincidentally, the baptized Tatars of Utïz Imän apostatized officially in the 1840s and were the target of repeated unsuccessful missionary visits well into the 1860s.32

Until the rise of jadid schools, these books constituted the main core of primary Islamic education. Märjani, in his construction of the past, associated some of them with the Bolghar period, but most were edited in the eighteenth century and solidified in print after the opening of the Asian printing house of Kazan. Children in traditional schooling moved from one book to another at their own pace. They sat on the floor around the mullah and repeated their lesson in chorus. After they had memorized one book, they began another. A special ceremony, organized by the parents, celebrated the completion of each book. Depending on the size of the school, children were assigned to older students (khalfas) who helped them to memorize their prayers and understand words of Arabic or Persian origin that were not common in vernacular speech.33

Children studied Sharâ’it al-Īmān during their first and sometimes second years of school. In a Tatar village located near the Krâshen village Apazovo, which first apostatized in the 1870s, Malov overheard a woman teach her two-year-old grandchild to chant the names of the Arabic letters and the abjad (meaningless combinations of letters that followed the ancient Semitic sequence of the alphabet and bore a numerical value). When the grandmother asked the child to repeat the letters over and over, the girl responded to her gaily: “Beldem, beldem (but I know already).” In this manner, children often knew the book by heart before reading the actual letters. For a Europeanized jadid who promoted functional literacy and the new phonetic method of reading (usul-i jadid), learning the abjad was a waste of time. However, learning it prepared the child to connect with the divine, chant prayers in Arabic (a language they did not know), and approach the Qur’an not as a casual book, but as the Word of God—the meaning of which was not readily available.34

When children learned to read, they did not start by sounding out the Arabic letters; first they learned their names. The names themselves helped the children to connect with God’s Creation, the Word of God, and God’s qualities. The letter “bä” (Roman “b”) was not just any letter, but the very first letter encountered in the Qur’an; the very first letter inscribed into the Well-Preserved Tablet by the Pen; the very first letter that begins Bismillah, a word that every Muslim should pronounce before starting an action; and the letter that referred to God’s Glory (Baha Allah). From this letter came a light, the light of God’s magnanimity toward his beloved

32. Malov, Prikhody starokreshchenyk i novokreshchenyk tatar v Kazanskoi eparkhii, 34; idem, “Statisticheskie svedeniia,” Uchenye zapiski Kazanskogo universiteta, 342; Ghaynetdin, Khaqiyqat’ yulïnnan, 37; Kemper, Sufis und Gelehrte, 197–198. Utïz Imäni abhorred Russian borrowings so much that he considered the presence of chairs and dining tables in Tatar merchant houses as dangerous innovations. Such furniture was also present in Krâshen villages. In fact, Russian missionaries determined the level of Christianization or Islamization of a baptized family by its presence or not. Ghabderäkhim Utïz Imäni al-Bolghari, Shighïr’lär, poemalar (Kazan, 1986), 87–88, 99.
The second letter inscribed into the Tablet was “sin” (Roman “s”), composed of three strokes. From each stroke a light came out: the first stroke reached the Throne (‘arsh); the second, the footstool (kursi); and the third, paradise. The first light belonged to those among the faithful who act piously, the second to those who do not squander, and the third to those who harness their nafs (passion). The third letter was “mim” (Roman “m”), signifying the Light of the Prophet Muhammad from which everything—cosmos, hell, paradise, prophets, and humankind—was created. The letters constituted the primordial keys to understand God’s nature and creative powers. In Rabghuzi’s Stories of the Prophets, a teacher asked Jesus, who was seven years old at the time, to repeat the alphabet and the abjad by rote. Jesus objected that he could not learn anything he could not understand. He then miraculously taught the alphabet’s mystical meaning to his teacher. Each letter, he explained, referred to a particular divine attribute: God’s blessing, eternity, and beauty. And the abjad helped retell the story of Adam, his worship of God, his disobedience, and God’s forgiveness. Thus when learning the names of the letters and the abjad, the children learned about God’s creative power and unique qualities, as well as His works through the lives of His servants, the prophets. The meaning of the letters was not fixed and depended largely on the teacher’s choice of emphasis in his daily pedagogical encounters. Popular belief held God would grant wishes to those who recited the abjad.

Before the rise of modernist Islam, reading at the primary level did not have a merely utilitarian value. Learning to read connected a child to a higher reality, absolute and fundamental, and gave her a script to understand both how the world came to be and how it ought to be. If the Qur’an was God’s uncreated word, the Arabic alphabet was one of God’s first creations, and appropriating it through rote memorization of meaningless combinations of letters or naming each letter of the words before sounding them out was a way to access God’s creative power, albeit indirectly. This, however, did not keep mischievous children from making up and repeating silly rhymes out of the unintelligible Arabic phrases they had to memorize.

Because Sharā’īt al-Īmān was short and to the point, illiterate parents could learn passages from their children, who repeated lessons at home. Illiterate baptized Tatars also could learn from their children who studied with literate neighbors. There also existed manuscript translations of the book’s Arabic prayers to facilitate understanding. After assimilating the letters, a child was called kitapkhan (reader of a book). In the second and third years, students switched to the Häft-i Yäk. At the same time they read through the Häft-i Yäk in Arabic, they turned to its tafsir, a verse-by-verse commentary of each chapter in Turkic, to aid comprehension. A baptized tailor from Elyshevo affirmed to Malov that it was impossible to read the Häft-i Yäk and the Qur’an without the tafsir. Children also memorized and learned to read Sufi poetry in türki. From those works already sung in the village or in the family context—the jadid poet

35. Ähmäd Bijän, Ånwär al-‘āshīqīn (Kazan, 1898), 9–10; Risālā-yi muraqām (Kazan, 1910), 2–3.
'Abdullah Tuqay (1886–1913) recalled that when he was little he would be lulled to sleep by their melody—mullahs extracted and developed stories about the history of Islam, lessons on morality, parables, and fables with appropriate interpretations. As explained by an old imam in Kargala, Orenburg province, the goal for the children was to live like the Prophet Muhammad. These lessons alternated with the learning by rote of prayers in Arabic. Again, the students brought the stories back into their homes and thus contributed to reinforcing and spreading Islamic culture.  

When he was older, Tuqay refused to salute a respectable neighbor who was drunk, and justified his behavior by quoting two verses from Bädäwâm, a munajat about the consequences of sin and pagan idolatry. In addition to offering paradigms of behavior, Sufi religious literature offered great solace for both Muslims and Muslims-to-be. It took different levels of religious knowledge into consideration, and taught that any man or woman, literate or not, could be granted extraordinary prophetic and intercessory powers. Most important, popular Islamic literature proposed that Tatars could prosper in a non-Muslim state without losing their religious integrity, and even extend the boundaries of their faith.

Belief, Knowledge, and Intercession in Traditional Muslim Literature

The main dilemma that illiterate or semiliterate peasants faced was how they could earn salvation without the theological knowledge of a learned person. Popular Islamic literature offered consoling answers to their anxieties as well as ways to improve their learning. It emphasized the supernatural powers of the prophets and Sufi shaykhs, the basic duties of a believer, the struggle against paganism, the differences between Christianity and Islam, and the belief in one God. At the same time it outlined the virtue of forgiveness, the power of faith alone, the importance of spreading the faith in a hostile environment, and the divine satisfaction from learning even one word of the Law. This kind of teaching, which at times inflated the Qur’anic narrative but was closer to the hadith narratives, was instrumental in the conversion of animist peoples and highly appropriate in the case of the Krâshens who, in some areas, had internalized the general perception that their ancestors had apostatized from Islam for greed.

Prophethood

Prejadid Tatar books and in particular tales of the prophets often diverged from the Qur’anic narrative to demonstrate the prophets’ supernatural powers. They used the work of the famous Baghdad historian and theologian Abu Ja’far Muhammad ibn Jarir at-Tabari (d. 923) as a source of inspiration. Various scholars of Islam, dating from the Kharijites and the Mutazilites to the modernist Tatar theologian Riza’ ad-Din Fâkhrid-Din, have been critical of Tabari and Turkic extrapolations of his work. Yet there is

39. Tuqay, Isemdä qalghanlär, 33; Bädäwâm kitäbä, 7.
no question that these stories and their hyperbolic metaphors played an instrumental role in the spread of Islam among the Turkic people of Eurasia and Central Asia.  

According to Qiṣṣa-yi Yūsuf, the Prophet Joseph showed signs of his divine calling even as a child. In a fantastic, extra-Qur’anic episode, a wolf who had refrained from attacking the boy explained that God had forbidden him to eat the flesh of the prophets. The Sufi Yalçihgïh ol called this type of miracle irḥas (a sign that indicated the presence of a future prophet). In some cases, the prophets were so powerful that they could change the natural order. In Qiṣṣa-yi Sulaymān (Tale of Solomon), an anonymous story that was popular among the Tatars, the sun and the moon asked Solomon to pray that God would change their orbit. The narrator implied that Allah would blindly and automatically respond to Solomon’s prayers whatever the consequences. This interpretation was quite different from the Qur’an where nature was submitted to God’s unique order. By contrast, in Qiṣṣa-yi Yūsuf, Joseph could change the natural order, but only as a passive tool of God, who was willing to bestow his messengers with extraordinary signs of grace; this view was much closer to the doctrine of Hanafi Islam as represented by the maturidite Central Asian scholar Nasafi (d. 1142). Qol ‘Ali also exaggerated the secular power of the Prophet Joseph by naming him king or sovereign (padishah, sultan) of Egypt instead of mere prime minister, as written in the Qur’an. Finally, prophets’ tombs were thought to be blessed with baraka (grace, divine gift, sacred power). When Joseph’s tomb was removed from his city, faithful Egyptian believers endured hardship. Although such doctrines contradicted the Qur’an from a strict Hanbali perspective, they pleased a popular audience that looked for magical mediators between humanity and God.  

The Sufi books portrayed Muhammad as a miracle worker even though the Qur’an explicitly denies this. In Kisekbash (The Severed Head), a thirteenth- or fourteenth-century Sufi epic, Muhammad resurrects both Kisekbash—a Muslim martyr whose decapitated head could still recite the Qur’an and his son who had been devoured by the Div (dew), a mythological giant. In 1908, the jadid poet Tuqay ridiculed this type of fantastic miracle story by composing a satire using the same rhythmic structure. In his version, the decapitated head recovered its human body thanks to a satanic ishan (shaykh, Sufi master) and not to the Prophet Muhammad.

41. Kitāb-i qiṣṣa-yi Hāḍhrāt-i Yūsuf, 12; Yalçihgïhol, Risâlä, 53.  
44. Kitāb-i qiṣṣa-yi Hāḍhrât-i Yūsuf, 45–46, 58–59, 64. The Hanbali jurists Ibn ‘Aqîl (d. 1119) and Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) opposed visits to the saints’ graves to seek blessings. Leor Halevi, Muhammad’s Grave: Death Rites and the Making of Islamic Society (New York, 2007), 227.  
45. Kisekbash kitâbî (Kazan, 1846), 15–16. According to Tatar historians, it was composed in the thirteenth century. Ia. S. Akhmetgaleeva, Issledovanie tiurkoiazychnogo pamyatnika “Kisekbash kitaby” (Moscow, 1979), 27. For Turkish scholars, though, the book was composed a century later. Mükhammatov, “Tatar-törek ädäbi baghlanïshlarï, “ 30.  
46. Tuqay, Pechän bazarï, yakhut yanga Kisekbash, in Âsärlär, vol. 1 (Kazan, 1955): 199. Tuqay used the same literary device to mock other Sufi works, conservative mullahs, and ishans. In Isuli Qadimehe,
However, these hyperbolic descriptions of prophets served a very specific religious didactic purpose, which proved to be instrumental in the spread of Islam among baptized and nonbaptized Finno-Ugric and Turkic communities. In particular, the prophets’ life stories helped draw a sharp line between Christianity and Islam and affirm the superiority of Islam. Rabghuzi, who wrote his book in the fourteenth century for the recently converted Mongol elite of the Chaghatay kingdom in Transoxiana, enjoyed exaggerating the powers of the prophets, but only to a point. When people stunned by Joseph’s beauty prostrated themselves before him, Joseph stopped them, so that no confusion would occur between himself and the divinity. The main lesson—underlined by the commentator himself—was that Muslims should not confuse the human with the divine, as Jesus’s disciples did with their prophet.  

In addition, prophets of Islam taught their faith in a clear vernacular language and revealed the Word of God in the context of their own culture. The Prophet Adam knew seventy-two languages and named all things in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. Joseph was also a polyglot, and spread his message in all languages. In order to cope better with changing mentalités, the prophets’ messages took various forms. In Abraham’s time, according to Rabghuzi, people honored wealth, so God made Abraham wealthy. In Moses’s time, people held magic in higher esteem, and consequently God gave Moses his magic staff. Finally, when Jesus was born, medicine was most important to people. Thus Jesus resurrected corpses and gave life to a bird of mud. Likewise, Tatar proselytizers used local languages and metaphors to spread their understanding of Islam.  

Most important for the Kräshens, whose ancestors might have accepted baptism for material incentives, prophets who led exemplary lives in a dangerous world populated with nonbelievers were not perfect, and their gifts were not unique to them. Satan put their faith to the test, and sometimes they failed miserably. Adam ate the forbidden fruit; Solomon trusted his pagan wife and lost his seal that gave him power over spirits; and Joseph took pride in his beauty, but God forgave each of them. Popular religious literature invited its readers and listeners to identify themselves with the prophets’ ordeals and struggles in hostile, sinful, and polytheistic environments. Job’s story, for instance, encouraged people to submit to God and show patience. Although Joseph and Muhammad were exiled from their native lands—as were apostate leaders deported to Siberia—their faith increased and became stronger. More important, Yalchïghol, the author of *Risālä-yi ‘Azīzā* (Treatise for ‘Azizā), insisted that any man or woman, by God’s grace and power, could enjoy the gifts bestowed on the prophets and the saints. Those gifts, essential to the spread of Islam, included the power to travel long distances in an instant, the strength to conquer hostile forces, a direct understanding of God’s message, incorruptibility after death, and financial

he imitated the scansion of *Muhammadýä Kitâbî* (“The book of Muhammad,” the work of the fifteenth-century Ottoman poet Muhammad Chelebi), and in *Khâtitâ-yi “Baṣrīghān,”* he made fun of *Baṣrīghān Kitâbî* (ibid., 32–33, 160, 251, 270).  

self-sufficiency. Popular belief, for instance, held that the body of muezzins did not decay. Thus, anyone could, by God’s will, act and be rewarded like a prophet.\footnote{51}

**Eschatology**

In Tatar popular literature, prophets were not only God’s messengers, but also powerful intercessors whose prayers could turn aside God’s righteous wrath. The Qur’an is ambivalent about the ability of the prophets to intercede for others. On the one hand, it affirms the individual responsibility of every person and that men and women will face God alone (2:48; 6:51). On the other hand, it assures believers that angels, true witnesses, and people who have made a covenant with God (this includes prophets) may intercede for the believing sinners (5:26; 43:86; 19:87). This ambivalence led to early theological disputes, provoked by concern for the believers who had received God’s message in their heart but had failed to follow all of His commandments. The hadith literature was less ambivalent and put the stress on communal affiliation instead of emphasizing individual accountability. It asserted that Muhammad would act as an intercessor for his whole community. Over time, all schools, except for the Mutazilites, affirmed that the prophets and angels could intercede for Muslims if they had God’s permission to do so.\footnote{52}

Turkic Islamic literature faced the same dilemma and provided different, at times contradictory, answers that allowed greater flexibility of discourse for the preachers of Islam. Overall, the Prophet Muhammad appeared to be highly compassionate, but the Turkic authors were also aware that too much compassion could lead to a relaxation of religious practice. *Nāṣīḥāt aš-Šāliḥīn* (Pious Admonitions), composed around the thirteenth century or modified later, opened with terrifying images of hell. No one escaped God’s wrath: neither young, nor poor, nor rich, nor old, nor women, nor slaves. The book urged believers to strictly obey the law because one day they would face God and face Him alone. Allah would not forgive those who missed one prayer (unless they had been killed by an infidel), forgot to give the *sadaqa* (alms) to the dervishes and the poor, spread false rumors against their fellow Muslims, or drank alcohol. Those sinners would be sent straight to hell, even if they repented.\footnote{53} However, in the same religious work, the Prophet Muhammad dispatched the faithful Abu Bakr, the first caliph (r. 632–634), to the place where the path to hell and paradise separate. The Prophet commanded him to keep his people from entering hell. Later, in an open transgression of the Qur’an (2:48), the Prophet asked Umar, the second caliph known for his wisdom, to cheat the judgment; if a Muslim was in trouble, Umar was to climb on the right side of the eschatological scale (*mizan*) to ensure that good deeds would seem to outweigh the bad. Finally, Muhammad ordered the renowned warrior ‘Ali, the fourth caliph (r. 656–61), to fight those ready to enchain one of his followers. Only then did Muhammad himself approach God and remind Him of the promise to spare the Prophet’s followers. But even at that crucial moment, God did not appear to


\footnote{53} *Kitāb ‘izzāt ma’āb nāṣīḥāt aš-Šāliḥīn* (hereafter *Nāṣīḥāt aš-Šāliḥīn*) (Kazan, 1908), 3–5.
be the ultimate judge. Only those who pleased Muhammad, and thus God indirectly, would be automatically saved.54

On the one hand, Nāṣīḥāt as-Sālihīn held that only a few would be blessed. Performing prayers was not enough to escape from hell, but neglecting them was unforgivable. Proof of genuine faith and social justice (such as giving alms to the poor) has to be demonstrated on the Day of Judgment. If those proofs happened to be deficient, the eternal benefits acquired from praying would be automatically annihilated. On the other hand, as baptized local peoples were often told, it was enough to recite the shahada (“there is no God but God and Muhammad is His Messenger”) once to be counted among the saved, or to repeat Astaghfirullah (I seek pardon and forgiveness from Allah) during the month preceding Ramadan and during the fast. Fāẓā’il ash-Shühūr, a much later work, included a longer list of exemptions. Those who called people to prayer, studied, brought their children to school, founded schools or mosques, had children of good religious standing, left a Qur’an to their descendants, taught for free, or helped needy fellow Muslims would not burn in hell. Those who fasted during certain months of the Muslim calendar would be spared, and those who were excluded from paradise in Nāṣīḥāt as-Sālihīn, such as penitent alcoholics and gossips, would be forgiven. One of Biktashi’s stories went as far as to include repentant sorcerers and nonbelievers who respected Muslim rituals; one story related how before his death, an unbeliever reprimanded his son for eating during the month of Ramadan, and so gained paradise.55

The list of exceptions continues to widen when one looks at the popular twelfth-century works of Sulayman Baqīrghani, also called Hakim Ata (d. 1186) and a disciple of Sufi Ahmad Yasawi (d. 1166). Thanks to Muhammad’s entreaties, God forgave the Prophet’s pagan parents—an apparent contradiction of the Qur’an (9:113). A popular tradition among the Tatārs held that Muhammad came to his parents’ tomb, resuscitated them, taught them Islam, and converted them; this again contradicted revealed scripture. But Rabghūzī’s account of the Prophet’s ascent to heaven hewed closer to the Qur’an (9:81, 114–15); for Muhammad, despite his efforts, failed to save his parents from hell. However, the Qur’an also allows prayers for the dead, and intercession constitutes one of the prophets’ inherent qualities. Again, individual missionaries of Islam could play on this discursive ambivalence in order to gain more converts among animists who worshiped their ancestors.56

At the Last Judgment, the ultimate intercessor between believers and God was Muhammad. Compassionate, the Prophet wept for both the martyrs and those weak in faith. In Ākhīr Zamān Kitābī, attributed to Baqīrghani and very popular among women, Muhammad commanded both angels and hellfire.57 The Prophet ordered the fires of hell not to burn his followers and asked Gabriel to climb on the scale

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55. Nāṣīḥāt as-sālihiyn, 8; Fāẓā’il, 17–18, 21–22, 38, 44, 53–54, 69.
57. According to Malov, the author of Ākhīr Zamān Kitābī could be Baqīrghani or Utīz Imānī. Malov, Akhyr zaman kitaby, pp. 34–35, 39.
on the side of the good deeds. More strikingly, God delegated to Muhammad His power to judge humanity; in the Qur’an the Prophet had no such authority. Even the angels and the prophets Adam, Abraham, and Jesus asked for his help. Although the Qur’an specifically declared that Muhammad would face God’s judgment like any other man, the author took pains to de-emphasize this doctrine, which he mentioned only at the end of his poem. His understanding of the Prophet’s unique intercession echoed—rather dimly for sure—the works of Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali’s (1058–1111) and classical Ashari and Hanafi creeds of Islam studied by older students in the Volga madrasa, which affirmed that Muhammad would be the only one authorized to speak for the faithful on Judgment Day.  

Besides Muhammad, Sufi books referred to other possible intercessors. One of Yalchighol’s stories emphasized Muhammad Baha’ ad-Din Naqshband (1317–1389), the eponymous founder of the Naqshbandi Sufi order, rather than the Prophet Muhammad. In Nāsīḥāt as-Ṣāliḥīn, the circle of intercessors was more indefinite: any teacher, mullah or shaykh, could intervene for his or her former students. Finally, Biktashi enlarged the number of intercessors further by including other less extraordinary protectors: any man who had fasted and prayed during the month of Rajab (the revered month during which the Prophet Muhammad completed his ascent to heaven) could save 70,000 men and women from hell. Yalchighol and Biktashi’s common position on intercession echoed the theologian and mystic al-Ghazali’s, but differed sharply from the conservative scholar Taqi ad-Din Ahmad ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328) who contested the efficacy of intercessory prayers.  

No sharp line divided the living and the dead in the books read at home or taught in primary schools. Angels of paradise and hell could be seen around tombs, and the dead visited the living in their dreams. In Nāsīḥāt as-Ṣāliḥīn, spirits came to earth with God’s permission to visit their relatives and give them advice. This went against the Qur’anic notion of barzakh (the barrier between the living and the dead that will remain until the day of resurrection), but echoed many similar stories in the hadith literature and other eschatological works in the Arab world. In the same way, human beings could have an impact on the destinies of the dead. Rabghuzi and Biktashi mentioned the story of a man who was in hell but entered the state of the blessed thanks to his son who studied well in the madrasa and recited Bismillah. In fact, in accordance with the spirit of hadith literature, popular Islamic books considered all members of the believing community morally responsible for assuring their fellows and relatives’ salvation. In Fāżā’il ash-Shühūr, when someone noticed fumes around the tomb of a young girl who had lived an immoral life, the Muslim community prayed for her and offered sacrifices to alleviate her suffering in the grave; later, through a dream, she revealed to her intercessors that her torments had ceased and she was at peace. At the Last Judgment, Biktashi contended, the good works and prayers of one’s pious descendants form a mountain of “sacred deeds” that are
added to a person's good works on the eschatological scale. This, again, emphasized intercession and forgiveness over a much stricter reading of the Qur'anic message on individual responsibility for one's sins. 62

Tatar funerals reflected the same sense of collective responsibility toward personal salvation. At home, relatives paid the fidyä (alms) to redeem the deceased’s missed prayers. The poor could offer a Qur’an instead of money or flour. At the cemetery, the community actively helped the deceased during the crucial moment when the two angels of the grave interrogated him or her, and weighed the answers on the eschatological scale of judgment. The grave diggers distracted the devil by pretending to argue over the burial cloth, and the mullah or relative stood forty feet from the grave whispering the right answers: “Do not be afraid, say, ‘my God is Allah, my prophet Muhammad, and my faith Islam.’” 63

The sense of responsibility for both the living and the spirits of the dead ancestors had an important impact on villagers who held to their animist beliefs and believed that their ancestors’ souls were active on earth. It was believed that spirits if neglected could threaten the village’s cohesiveness and well-being with diseases and natural catastrophes. In this environment, the teachings of Nāṣīḥāt as-Šāliḥīn and Fāżā’il ash-Shūhūr presented a consoling view. Ancestors’ spirits were seen as God’s servants descending to earth to warn about the Last Judgment. As for evil spirits who rebelled against Allah, they could be conquered only if the community united, repented, turned to God, and followed the sharia scrupulously. As the baptized often heard from Muslim itinerant preachers, the ring of Solomon—a present from God created out of the Light of Muhammad—lost its powers over the demons when Solomon allowed one of his wives to worship idols in his palace. 64

In Muslim tales, objects could also intervene for a person’s salvation or a believer’s temporary relief from eternal sufferings. Everyday utensils such as mattresses, clothing, shoes, water, and qomghans (bronze ritual vessels used for ablutions) prayed to God to save those who got up early and performed their ablutions and prayers. The Qur’an and other religious books of a student who fell asleep in a Jewish cemetery provided relief from the torments of the grave for the Jews buried there. 65 Biftashi also ascribed supernatural powers to talismans. An alcoholic who, before drowning, swallowed a piece of paper with the word “Bismillah” ended up in paradise thanks to his amulet. The angels of God’s judgment, Munkar and Nakir, had not touched him, and God immediately forgave him. The drunkard escaped the usual test that everyone has to endure—the weighing of one’s good and bad deeds. The sinner did not owe his salvation solely to the magic powers of the talisman, but to his acknowledgment of the power of the written word on the amulet. The story recalls a well-known hadith: “God will say: Let those leave hell whose hearts contain even the weight of a

65. Fāżā’il, 43; Nāṣīḥāt as-šāliḥīn, 30.
mustard seed of faith.” The amulet was the “mustard seed of faith,” but even in the context of this hadith, Biktashi’s narrative went beyond expectations: the sinner had not endured the torments of the grave even for a limited time, but went directly to the Garden. Furthermore, the sinner had not verbally repented, and even if he had, the Qur’an specifies that after committing evil, last-minute repentance on one’s deathbed is not enough to be absolved from punishment. In general, Biktashi’s Fāżā’il ash-Shūhūr was a much more optimistic work than Nāṣihāt as-Ṣālihin. The latter book focused on frightful images of hell and insisted on punishment, while Biktashi who taught in an area populated by starokreshchenye, focused more on rewards.

Knowledge, Miracles, and Faith

Tatar popular religious literature indicated that there were two different levels of adherence to Islam: faith and religious praxis. Failure to observe rituals could send one to hell, but observance of devotional rituals without faith had the same consequence. Faith was the ultimate key to salvation. However, what distinguished a Muslim from a non-Muslim in this world was praying five times a day, fasting during Ramadan, performing the zikr (perpetual remembrance of God as one of the foundations of the Sufi path), giving alms to the poor, learning and teaching about Islam, and having the capacity to perform miracles through God’s power. Constant religious praxis held the whole community together. What is more important is that it guaranteed the community’s future salvation as a collective body and its protection from the arrival of an evil satanic despot. The correct fulfillment of religious duties implied a commonly shared obligation to learn about the contents of the Qur’an from mullahs, shaykhs, and more knowledgeable kin.

Nāṣihāt as-Ṣālihin devoted more pages to learning than to other religious obligations. By seeking knowledge, Muslims would accumulate enormous rewards and blessings in the afterlife. The author of Nāṣihāt as-Ṣālihin was not too demanding. He wrote that learning a single word brought a blessing, and learning one hadith awarded the equivalent of seventy prophets’ good deeds. For each letter read, one would receive the blessing of a prophet. Students of an ‘alim (teacher, scholar) would be blessed on Judgment Day: angels would place a mountain of 40,000 gold coins on the right side of their eschatological scale. At the end of time, scholars of Islam would be forgiven thanks to the angels’ intervention and would stand by the Prophet Muhammad.

In the same book, learned men of Islam, especially Sufis, whom baptized Tatars held in high esteem were called “the prophets’ successors.” Like the prophets, they were endowed with two great gifts: knowledge of God and the power to perform miracles in the name of Allah. Their mission, though, was not to carry a new revelation, but to educate and fortify people’s faith. Their knowledge of God was equal to, even greater than that of, the prophets of Israel. In one anecdote, Moses questioned al-Ghazali and Abu Hanifa, the eighth-century eponymous founder of the

67. Fāżā’il, 12; Qur’ān, 4:118.
68. Nāṣihāt as-Ṣālihin, 27–35.
Hanafi school of law to which Turkic Muslims adhered. Everyone, including Moses, marveled at their answers. In another story, the mythical saint, prophet, and guide on the spiritual path, al-Khidr (the “Ever Green” or the “Green One” in Arabic), whom Tatars believed to be immortal, appalled Moses by committing apparent atrocities. Ignorant of the hidden reasons behind al-Khidr’s actions, Moses showed his inability to understand God’s will beyond external appearances. While Moses represented external knowledge, al-Khidr personified esoteric knowledge. Yalchigol went a step further, considering Sufis’ knowledge superior to all prophets except for Muhammad. According to him, Shaykh Naqshband bluntly told al-Khidr that Muslim teachers were superior to him, even if he was a prophet and was still alive. The reason for their superiority was that after the coming of Muhammad, Muslims could draw all knowledge, both external and esoteric, directly from the Qur’an. The time of prophethood had passed; consequently Naqshband’s and his followers’ teaching was superior to that of the prophets.69

Among the most venerated spiritual guides in the Tatar and baptized communities were the dervishes, shaykhs, and hermits. At times, authors of religious books praised the principles of asceticism and poverty, and denounced intellectual knowledge as a tool to challenge God. They demonstrated bias against family ties, accumulation of riches, and men of knowledge, who sought to realize the dreams of this world instead of the next. When the final hour came, they insisted, men of learning would succumb to death as well. In other words, knowledge did not have to be bookish, but could derive directly from God without any intermediary. The Prophet Muhammad was the best example of an illiterate (ummi) who became the vessel of God’s word. Likewise, in Risālá-yi ‘Azīzā, the future shaykh Habibullah, then a young boy who sold cantaloupes and watermelons at a market in Bukhara, was distressed by the lack of faith among the inhabitants of his city and, after seeing Muhammad Baha’ ad-Din Naqshband in a dream, became the Sufi disciple of Andirjan in Samarkand. Later, Andirjan asked him to go back to Bukhara in order to instruct his kind, despite the young boy’s doubts: he was only twenty years old, had no knowledge of the miracles and theology, and needed to learn more from his teacher. But the boy prayed and Allah gave him direct understanding of the divine message in one day. Apart from intellectual knowledge, kinship and riches could also be a hindrance on the straight path, and at the Last Judgment, Sufi authors reminded sinners that fortune, parents, spouses, and children would not serve as intercessors or mediators.70

In texts used in primary Qur’anic school, signs and miracles—not intellectual or polemical arguments—revealed the superiority of Muhammad over other prophets. A cloud of glory, indicating the presence of God and often mentioned in Sufi biographies, followed Muhammad wherever he went and a seal (mōher) on his neck said that God would always support him and respond to his requests. After witnessing those signs, a Christian monk converted to Islam. Later, Muhammad entered a Jewish house and all the menorahs flew into pieces.71

71. Fāżā‘īl, 5–6.
Central figures in Turkic Islam were presented as possessing appropriate signs of sainthood or proofs of their superiority. When Imam al-Ghazali and Abu Hanifa answered Moses’s questions, the audience marveled, but the author did not expand on the topics discussed. Amazement and wonder sufficed to explain al-Ghazali’s and Abu Hanifa’s understanding of divine reality. Abu Hanifa’s death was also surrounded by wonders. When a certain Muhammad b. Masak washed his corpse, Abu Hanifa’s head turned to him and showed a sign on the forehead, saying “Eh, quiet soul, come back to me.” On each part of his body shined a divine inscription, and a secret voice came down to sing his glory. The caliph, who doubted that Abu Hanifa’s legal school was a true reflection of the Divine Law, heard the voice and repented.  

Signs and miracles were essential proofs of God’s support. They demonstrated the superiority of Islam over Judaism and Christianity, heightened the awareness of religious duties, and showed that God could work through his most humble servants. The attribution of miracles to saints did not necessarily go against Sunni orthodoxy. Even Ibn Taymiyya, known as one of the strictest commentators who vigorously opposed saint worship, recognized the saints’ miracles as signs of divine support. The Sufi Yalchighol did not separate himself from the traditional understanding of miracles in Islam. He carefully distinguished between miracles attributed to prophets (mu’jiza) and miracles connected with saints (karamat). According to his categorization, the mu’jiza (which literally means “disabling”) referred to a phenomenon that defied physical laws such as flying in the sky, making water flow from one’s fingers, making trees and animals talk, or walking on water. The karamat—which in practice did not differ from the mu’jiza—were gifts from God at a given moment, when needed. By allowing a karamat, God acknowledged the qualities of the saint: love for God, conscientious religious observance, and abhorrence of sin (fornication, lying, pride, and neglecting ritual prayers). Yalchighol made the point of attacking the presumption of “men without religion” who claimed that shaykhs did not need to pray and follow basic religious practices. Those unbelievers falsely held that holy men who have reached the highest level of sanctity could pray silently and observe external rituals in their heart. Miracles committed by men who did not follow the sharia were called istidraj; God granted them success at the beginning of their sin, allowing them to work miracles only in order to hasten their way to perdition. The believers’ responsibility in such instances was to recognize the falsity of these miracles by identifying the so-called saint as an unworthy servant of God. Yalchighol also attacked the popular idea that shaykhs could perform miracles on their own, for even holy men could not read humans’ heart and interpret the future. Miracles came only by God’s grace. Finally, Yalchighol did not limit the working of miracles to the shaykhs; God could grant the power to work miracles to any man close to Him who followed the sharia to the letter. But the devil could also work miracles, and those who did not obey Islamic law, that is the infidels, could perform wonders only by Satan’s power. Such was the case of the pharaoh who ruled during Moses’s time, who successfully performed

miracles but then perished. Although the text did not refer to Russians and their adoration of miraculous icons and crosses specifically, the pharaoh, as a pagan ruler, could easily substitute for the Russian czar, protector of the Russian “pagan” church. When missionaries visited apostate villages, their inhabitants yelled to them: “How come your crosses do not perform miracles anymore?”

Contrary to what later jadid critics implied, the authors of those books did not advocate ascetic principles of poverty and mendicancy as the only sure way to gain salvation. Not all of their readers had the ability to become hermits or dervishes; most believers lived in the world, earned a living, and had families. In a number of anecdotes, mullahs acted as veterinarians or doctors and Sufi shaykhs were not supposed to depend on people’s earnings; they had many trades. Shaykh Naqshband was a tailor, a weaver, and a skullcap maker. Shaykh Andirjan herded cows, and his student, Shaykh Habibullah, had a shop and proselytized among the Bukharan merchants. Social responsibility, which included giving alms, adopting orphans, founding schools and mosques, praying for the whole community, and teaching the sharia, was another way to be counted among the blessed. The rich could earn salvation by giving to the poor and the teachers of Islam. In fact, according to Biktashi, the first to enter paradise will not be the learned, the shahids (witnesses, martyrs of the faith), or those who performed the pilgrimage to Mecca, but the generous patrons whose alms supported the schools. All proselytizers of Islam in the baptized milieu had a small trade.

Turkic religious books also showed ways simple believers could surpass the shaykhs and shahids of the biblical times. Biktashi portrayed the Prophet Muhammad as deeply concerned about God’s judgment on his people; after all, their deeds could hardly compare with those holy Jewish and Christian hermits who had spent hundreds of years in prayer inside a white mountain, waiting for Muhammad’s coming. Worse, Muhammad’s people could not compare with the shahid Samson who fought 1,000 lunar months in jihad. Fortunately, the angel Gabriel revealed that Muhammad’s followers could surpass previous nations by spending the month of Ashura (the first month of the Islamic year during which Husayn, the grandson of Muhammad, was murdered at Karbala in 680), the month of Rajab, the fifteenth day of the month of Shaban (the month of division in which sins are absolved), and the night of Laylat al-Qadr (the Night of Power in which the Qur’an was first revealed) in repentance, worship, and fasting. However, the performance of those rituals should come directly from the heart. More than once, Biktashi reminded his reader or listener that only faith—not the mechanical performance of rituals—brought future rewards in the afterlife.

Although the author of Nāṣīḥāt aṣ-Ṣāliḥīn exhibited some initial mistrust toward knowledge, he advised his readers on how to begin the study of the sharia. Students of Islam, he warned, should not have access to higher forms of learning before having first a good grasp of ‘ibadat or acts of worship. Shaykh Naqshband was quoted as

75. Yālchighol, Risālā, 15, 53–54; NART, f.4, op. 98, d.9, l. 82 ob.
76. Yālchighol, Risālā, 5.
77. Fāżā’īl, 51–52.
saying that the study of logic (mantyaq) should not start before integrating the rules
governing acts of worship. A man who skipped this important stage would be inca-
pable of following the straight path from his heart.79 The knowledge of devotional
rituals constituted the bulk of the teaching contained in popular Islamic literature.
These books provided proofs of the Muslim faith and enumerated the obligations of
the believers toward God, family, and community. They included samples of prayers,
the Muslim calendar, rules of purity for women, and comportment toward family
members, fellow Muslims, and nonbelievers. The primer Sharā’ī’t al-Īmān listed the
key prayers in Arabic and instructions to perform them in türki, specifying each
time the number of prostrations, but without the support of stories or marvelous
deeds found in Nāsiḥāt aṣ-Ṣāliḥīn and Fāżá’il ash-Shūhūr that appealed more to the
believers’ imagination, often by quoting from Rabghuzi’s tales of the prophets. The
prayers in those two books were more succinct and in Turkic. Prayers in Arabic were
reduced to short Islamic expressions, repeated a number of times such as Bismillah,
Astaghirullah (I seek pardon and forgiveness from Allah), Subhanallah (Glory to be
to Allah), or Al-Hamdulillah (Praise be to Allah). Those expressions, commonly used
in the entire Islamic world, were already part of the folk’s spoken language among
both apostates (especially women) and Tatars. They were believed to make people’s
dreams and wishes come true.80 In the very last chapter of his book, Biktashi encour-
age believers to perform the zikr after the obligatory prayer in order to remove all
sins, by repeating thirty-three times, one after another, each of the three following
litanies: Subhanallah, Al-Hamdulillah, Allah akbar (God is great), and by closing the
hundredth incantation with the shahada. (The number of invocations corresponded
to the ninety-nine Divine Names, with the hundredth still unknown.) After the ‘iba-
dat, Nāsiḥāt aṣ-Ṣāliḥīn mentioned the importance of studying the tafsir, hadith, and
fiqh (jurisprudence) before moving into the study of any other sciences, including the
sciences of this world, and especially trade.81

Living in a Non-Muslim State

Besides offering consolation for a lack of knowledge and tools for overcoming it,
Tatar religious literature also provided a paradigm of behavior for Muslims living
in a predominantly non-Muslim state. Any relaxation of proper religious or social
behavior could lead to the coming of a despot or false prophet (ad-Dajjal, literally,
“the deceiver” or “the imposter”). As elsewhere in the Islamic world, preachers often
attributed defeat by invaders as a sign of religious decline in the community. The
books remedied such decline by offering four possible models for living in a world
dominated by non-Muslims.

The first model related to solitary figures living in a kafir (infidel) world. Biktashi’s
Fāżā’il ash-Shūhūr opened with the image of a Christian monk (rahib) who had con-
verted to Islam but, for fear of persecution, pretended to be a Christian while secretly
observing the tenets of Islam.82 The second model was that of the imprisoned Prophet

79. Nāsiḥāt aṣ-Ṣāliḥīn, 35.
81. Fāżā’il, 70; Nāsiḥāt aṣ-Ṣāliḥīn, 35.
82. Fāżā’il, 2–3.
Joseph, who spoke about his faith to fellow prisoners. Thus, even under foreign rule, Islam could expand its territory and even convert pagan rulers. Similarly mullahs and _abîstays_ of baptized origin could emulate Joseph and teach underground. Copying Qol ‘Ali who claimed that the pharaoh could have converted to Islam, Tatars spread rumors among Krâshens that their pharaoh, the czar of Holy Russia, had converted to Islam, had allowed Krâshens to become Muslims, and even had sent them a Muslim skullcap as a present.  

The third model demonstrated the possibility of cooperation with non-Muslim authorities. In _Qiṣṣa-yi Yūsuf_, the Prophet Joseph served his infidel masters as a slave in Egypt; by so doing, he rose to a high position and brought many to Islam. He nonetheless obeyed the pagan pharaoh’s law even as he continued to proselytize. But when cooperation demanded abandoning some vital part of Islam, the Sufi ethic offered a fourth model—complete and total separation from the non-Muslim populace. Thus when the King of Egypt asked Joseph to stop proselytizing, Joseph instead founded a city where only Muslims could reside. The book of _Bâdâwâm_ went further and urged true believers not to drink or eat with non-Muslims. By extension, the Sufi teaching contained in these books encouraged resistance to Russians when the latter tried to impose legal prohibitions on Tatar proselytism, but, as the example of Joseph showed, it did not prohibit Muslims from working within the Russian political system—using legal means to help protect and expand God’s rule. In 1916, the reformist theologian Fâkhr ad-Din cited Joseph as a model of action for all Tatars to follow.  

Female Scripts of Action in Traditional Islamic Literature

Tatar religious books also provided models of action for women living on the Krâshen-Tatar-Russian frontier. Apart from the mullahs, shaykhs, and itinerant Sufis, women constituted another category of spiritual guides. Without the support of wives and mothers, the apostasy movements could not win. As much as for men, Sufi-inspired books constituted the bulk of Islamic knowledge among peasant women who, in their turn, propagated their content in the form of _munajat_. Actually, women were the main (but not exclusive) carriers and producers of the _munajat_ genre, which in a poetic and succinct form recalled the prophets’ trials and the believers’ duties.

Boys interested in becoming mullahs could pursue their schooling in prestigious madrasas, but women’s education did not go beyond the _maktab_ (primary Qur’anic school). Peasant girls did not follow the madrasa curriculum, but did read and sing popular Sufi poetry, which made the high tradition of Islamic knowledge available to them. Mullahs’ daughters were more privileged. Because of their fathers’ position and the chance of a better marital match in the future, they had access to other more advanced forms of religious knowledge. For example the mother of the Bashkir historian Zeki Velidi Togan (1890–1970) who was the daughter of a village imam educated

84. _Kitâb-i qiṣṣa-yi Hâźrât-i Yûsuf_, 63; _Bâdâwâm kitâbî_ (Kazan, 1861); Fâkhr ad-Din, _Jâwâmi’_, 127 (hadith no. 89).
in Bukhara and Khiva, became fluent in Persian. She kept samples of Farid ad-Din Attar (1197–1223), Jalal ad-Din Rumi (1207–1273), Nizam ad-Din Mir Alisher Navoi (1441–1501), Ahmad Yasawi, and Allahiyar’s Sufi poetry in a notebook and taught them to her son in Persian and in Chagatay Turkish. Women liked to integrate and recycle these poems into their munajat repertoire, moving freely from oral to written form and vice versa. Togan’s mother secured her position as her husband’s only wife, by recycling a love poem to remind him of his promise not to marry any other.

Authorship was not an issue as the main function of the munajat performance in commemorative religious festivals was to cause the listeners to remember prophetic knowledge and reawaken the feeling that they belonged to a higher divine reality and a common community of faith.85

Traditional Sufi-inspired prose and poetry did not address a female audience specifically. Faithful to the letter of the Qur’an, Bädäwām Kitābī and other books demanded the same piety from men and women.86 They nevertheless included powerful female characters and offered valuable paradigms of behavior in the religious sphere, despite Muslim mystics’ ambivalence toward women. Early on, a majority of Sufis viewed sex with women as a hindrance on the path to God and considered “the weaker sex” as inferior, unclean, and dangerous. But later, some Sufis developed a more positive attitude toward sex and women, considering love for a woman as a manifestation of the Deity. Al-Ghazali in particular, who reconciled Sufism with mainstream theology, used love for a woman as a metaphor of the loving relationship between the believer and God. Both traditions were present in Eurasia and Central Asia.87

Rabghuzi, who otherwise presented very positive images of women, retained an early view that women were unclean. He thanked God for “creating us as males,” and considered women’s cunning greater than Satan’s.88 Although Eve (Hawwa) was not specifically mentioned in the story of the fall in the Qur’an, Rabghuzi’s work echoed earlier Arabic tales of the prophets and held her responsible for causing it. A woman’s heart, said Rabghuzi, was softer than a man’s and so more apt to listen to Satan. As a result of her disobedience, menstruation—thus uncleanness and inability to perform all rituals at all times—remained her lot until Judgment Day.89 This unflattering portrayal of women was also rampant in other popular eschatological works in the Middle Volga. In Näşihät aș-Ṣâlihin, an ugly old woman

86. Bädäwām kitābī, 2–3.
appeared at the end of the world and was thrown into hell as the symbol of earthly temptations. And in Qīṣṣa-yi Sulaymān, the writer warned men not to follow women’s advice because they were stupid and ignorant. In the first pages of the story of Joseph, Rabghuzi also presented the love of Potiphar’s wife for the beautiful Joseph, her adoptive son, as adulterous, incestuous, and unclean. Zulaykha had betrayed the trust of her husband, a believing Copt (here means Egyptian) who worked for the pharaoh of Egypt only on the condition that he could freely practice his faith. Rabghuzi insisted that Zulaykha desired Joseph but did not really love him because she told lies about him and sent him to prison. This narrative echoed earlier Arabic expansions of the story of Joseph, such as the *tafsir* and *tarikh* (*History of the Prophets and Kings*) by Tabari during the Abbasid period, where Potiphar’s wife was nothing but a figure of temptation, a symbol of women’s guile and uncontrolled sexuality.

Although the superiority of men is affirmed in the Turkic stories of Joseph, both Rabghuzi and Qol ‘Ali catered to a female audience. Qol ‘Ali’s narrative was not only a tale of Joseph, but a tale of Joseph and Zulaykha. The latter was not responsible for her insatiable sexual appetite because her infatuation with Joseph’s beauty sprang from a divinely inspired dream she experienced while a mere child. Her marriage with Potiphar was not even consummated; God had placed a female jinn in his bed. In Rabghuzi’s first pages of the story, Zulaykha did not differ much from the Joseph narratives in the Bible and the Qur’an. That is, she was not an innocent child, tormented by a dream, but a cunning woman whose “bad deeds would always be remembered by all preachers.” Later, however, the author claimed that, in fact, Zulaykha could not do anything against her love for Joseph. God, and not Satan, had affected her heart. Men and animals also fell under Joseph’s spell. Even in the most sinful moments of the story, Zulaykha sang of her desperate love for Joseph in beautiful love poems in Arabic, Persian, and Chaghatay Turkish that in no way indicated that her passion was impure. On the contrary, these lyrical rhymes could easily be taken out of their context and serve as models of love letters for young people, eager to express their feelings in writing.

A female audience could also object that trickery was not an exclusively female feature. Although in the Qur’an Potiphar was quick to generalize his wife’s cunning behavior to all women, the story of Joseph provided many other examples of trickery that involved men. Joseph’s brothers lied about his death when they told their father, Jacob, that a wolf had devoured his favorite son. Finally, Joseph was not as perfect as his beloved Zulaykha, and even the wolf was not as evil as Potiphar believed.

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he seemed at first glance. At times he showed pride in his beauty. If in the Qur'an, Jacob's favorite son was shown as the victim par excellence, in Qol 'Ali and Rabghuzi, he was surpassed by Zulaykha, who, contrary to Joseph, did not enjoy the protection of angels in her sufferings. Had not Gabriel intervened to save Joseph from temptation, he would have failed the test of prophethood miserably.

Zulaykha in both Qol 'Ali's and Rabghuzi's work was an extraordinary model of Sufi practice in an overwhelmingly pagan environment. Although in Tabari's work, there was no character development, in Qol 'Ali's poem, Zulaykha's conversion was described as a gradual and triumphant process. First, Potiphar's wife used her idols to seduce Joseph, but instead her idols recognized Joseph's authority, declaring him Prophet of the Truth. As punishment, Zulaykha's love for Joseph was not returned, and she became an old blind woman. She, however, continued to love Joseph until she finally concluded that his God had paralyzed her idols' powers. She broke her idols, gave away her riches, and declared to Joseph: “I believe in one God and in you, Prophet Joseph.” These words reminiscent of the shahada purified Zulaykha who regained her youth and beauty. Joseph married her, and twelve children blessed their union. Only after her recognition of Allah's Oneness, did she find happiness in marriage and childbearing. Before she broke her idols, her love for Joseph was pure lust, but after she had decided to follow the sharia, she finally entered the path (tariqa) on which mystics walk. She went through the classical stations of the Sufi ladder (repentance, abstinence, poverty, patience, love, and fear) before she met Joseph again, and surrendered her heart in the contemplation of the divine beloved. Zulaykha was no less than a traditional Sufi disciple in search of unity with God.

In the particular tradition that Qol 'Ali represented, Sufism did not exclude women from the path. In fact there was no distinction between men and women in their ability to reach the divine. Neither miracle worker nor prophet, Zulaykha was nevertheless a mirror image of Joseph. Both had to learn patience, abstinence, and trust in God before being united. Both were marked by their extraordinary beauty and enjoyed a close relationship with their fathers. Zulaykha slept on her father's lap the same way Joseph did in Jacob's arms.

In Rabghuzi's history of the prophets, Zulaykha reached the highest level of the Sufi path in an even more striking way. Rabghuzi, under the influence of the famous Persian Sufi poet Farid ad-Din Attar, compared her to a moth who cast herself into a candle flame to know the divine. Not only did Zulaykha overcome the limitations of her carnal soul, but she came to surpass the Prophet Joseph in her quest for God. The story indeed took an unusual, humorous twist. One tradition related that after they married, God gave Zulaykha's passion to Joseph, and Joseph's love for God to Zulaykha. The whole drama was then reversed: Joseph became the one who pursued Zulaykha, and Zulaykha, empowered with her new love, ignored Joseph and prayed

days and nights uninterruptedly. Joseph came to experience Zulaykha’s pain and Zulaykha Joseph’s joy. Only later did they both unite sexually.  

On another occasion, Rabghuzi took the women’s side against the quintessentially male Joseph. At one time the ladies of Egypt (including some believers in the one true God) complained that Joseph pursued them and attacked their honor; they even called him a sorcerer. In earlier Sufi texts and folk literature, women were more likely to be associated with magic and sorcery. Zulaykha was not the only one to conquer her lower self or carnal soul. Joseph also had to overcome his lower instincts to resist Zulaykha and become a prophet. Finally, not only was Zulaykha a mirror image of Joseph, she was also a mirror image of Jacob. Both had lost their sight when separated from their beloved. Because Joseph’s father recognized himself in Zulaykha, he gave her back her youth and fertility. Jacob himself had erred earlier by separating a slave mother from her son; for that reason, he was separated from his beloved child. Both Zulaykha and Jacob had repented and gained or regained possession of the divine light embodied in Joseph.  

Interestingly, Rabghuzi continued to refer to Zulaykha positively in later cycles devoted to other prophets. In medieval Arabic literature, Aisha—the Prophet Muhammad’s youngest wife whose active participation in the fights following his death met the community’s resentment, was associated with the cunning Zulaykha. In the Stories of the Prophets, Potiphar’s wife became the prototype of all pagan women who had recognized God’s true messengers, including Khadija, the Prophet’s first wife, whom Rabghuzi explicitly compared to Zulaykha. Both Zulaykha and Khadija were older, wealthier, and politically more powerful than their consorts, but nevertheless recognized them as the prophets of God and became their servants.  

Concretely, Zulaykha’s example did not mean that women yielded all power to their husbands after conversion and remained in ecstatic contemplation. In fact, when Zulaykha was filled with God’s love, her husband could not have sex with her. Rabghuzi’s prose showed that if God willed, women could have the upper hand in matters of physical love: they could make their mates submit to their desires and experience happiness; they could even refuse to have sex. If necessary, women could also challenge male authority to expand Islam, introduce and enforce sharia rules in the pagan milieu. Thus, at the very beginning of the cycle of Ayyub (Job), Rabghuzi introduced a new feminine character, Qïz Qïsun, whose Turkic name means the mutilated girl. Significantly, Rabghuzi chose to recount the tale of Qïz Qïsun—a character who appears nowhere in the Qur’an—just after Joseph’s story. In doing so, Rabghuzi inspired women to think of themselves as bearers of Islam outside their households. Like Zulaykha, Qïz Qïsun was a pagan. Her father, Bahil, was Job’s uncle and an idol worshiper. When the angel Gabriel came to her in the form of a dove, she converted

97. Qīsās-i Rabghūzī (Kazan, 1859), 206; Al-Rabghūzī, Stories, vol. 2: 274. Zulaykha’s attitude was in accordance with the doctrine of some Sufis who felt unnecessary to pursue a life of asceticism once they had reached the summit of spiritual life. Margaret Smith, Rabia: The Life and Work of Rabia and Other Women Mystics in Islam (Oxford, 1994), 73.  
to Islam, destroyed the idol her father gave her, and distributed its ornamental jewels to the poor. For this crime, her father had her right hand cut off, and expelled her from her homeland. But Qïz Qïsun endured the pain and later met her future husband, the pagan king Mathwil, whom she refused to marry unless he converted first. (According to sharia rules, a woman cannot marry a nonbeliever.) Zulaykha experienced God’s love but did not make new converts; but Qïz Qïsun was the channel by which her husband, her father, and the whole kingdom came to God. Like the Prophet Muhammad and earlier the Prophet Joseph, she was exiled and built a new community of believers in a pagan milieu. Coincidentally, the story of the mutilated girl was also popular in sixteenth-century Spain among baptized Muslims. There she was called the handless maiden of Carcayona. In both contexts, Eurasian and Morisco, the tale offered a means of resistance to Christian attempts to control Islam. 100

Qïz Qïsun prepared the way for another important female character, the Queen of Sheba or Bilqis, who converted to Islam, thanks to Solomon, and whose beauty, according to Tabari, matched Joseph’s beauty. Although neither the Hebrew Bible nor the New Testament indicate that the Queen was an idolatrous gentle, in the Qur’an Bilqis is a sun worshiper who receives a message from Solomon, summoning her to surrender. She fails Solomon’s tests of knowledge, and therefore converts to Islam. In Rabghuzi, the emphasis was not so much on the Prophet’s superior knowledge as on Bilqis’s wisdom. In fact, the cautious queen tested Solomon before he tested her. When she received the letter commanding her to renounce everything, she knew that the letter came from God and that Solomon was a prophet, but, concerned for her people’s safety, the queen opted to verify its content—after all, Solomon could have been a false prophet. Bilqis ruled that if Solomon were a true prophet he would not care for her riches. Solomon passed her test and she converted, and through her, as with Qïz Qïsun, her nation did so as well. However, Solomon failed Bilqis’s very last test. When he told his new wife that a far greater prophet named Muhammad would appear, the queen asked whether she would get a chance to meet him. Jealous, Solomon felt challenged and sent his wife back to her kingdom, where she died as a true believer. Thus, in Rabghuzi, both Bilqis and Zulaykha, despite the “softness of their heart” and the limitations of their gender, came to surpass their prophet-husband in their love for God; and both Bilqis and Qïz Qïsun led their people to recognize the true faith and observe its laws. 101

The stories of Zulaykha, Qïz Qïsun, Bilqis, and Khadija, to whom Rabghuzi devoted a significant portion of his text, came to provide a missionizing model of conduct beyond Central Asia and beyond his own time for women on the Volga frontier. Turkic peoples in the Middle Volga practiced exogamy, and brides-to-be carried their Islamic knowledge to their new families and peoples on the frontier, as Qïz Qïsun and Queen Bilqis did. Rabghuzi and his predecessor Qol ‘Ali had access to various sources of Qur’anic and extra-Qur’anic origin, as well as Sufi and classical


Arabic exegetic material. They opted for stories that could please a female audience without challenging male dominance. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, stricter Muslim theologians had criticized the popular tales of the prophets for adding too much material to the Qur’anic text. But these criticisms did not deter writers from composing these books for the benefit of new converts.  

Apart from stories of religious conversion in the pagan milieu, marital relations and motherhood constituted other important key themes in Turkic religious literature. Again, the texts presented dissenting portrayals of women’s duties toward their consort: on the one hand, wives were to serve their husband almost unconditionally; on the other hand, they were taught that God came first and their husband second. Thus, wives were reminded to treat their husbands with loyalty and submission in the same way a murid obeyed his shaykh. Strong metaphors, involving sexual symbols (e.g., hair) and polluting bodily fluids (e.g., blood, pus) were used to emphasize the wives’ marital duties. In one home, after all the candles had been used up, a woman lit one of her braids to provide comfort for her husband’s eyes while he was eating. When suffering befell the Prophet Job, his wife sold two of her braids for a piece of bread to feed her husband, and carried him on her back while his pus ran over her face. According to one hadith, cited by Biktashi, a wife was expected to lick the bloody wounds of her husband, if necessary—but even this act, according to the hadith, would not be enough to fulfill her duty. Conversely, if a woman caressed her husband’s face, asked for advice, and showed understanding, she would be surrounded by the divine light in the hereafter.

But Job’s wife was not her husband’s “slave.” She chose to stay with her husband voluntarily (the prophet’s other wives had left him after he had granted them divorce). Popular religious literature took great care to limit women’s allegiance to their husbands. “Allah would have asked women to revere their husband if He had not said ‘There is no deity save God,’” commented Biktashi in his section about women’s duties. Household chores could not interfere with women’s religious duties, which included the five daily prayers, the Ramadan and other days of fast, the performance of the zikr, the reading of the Qur’an and other religious texts, and service to the poor. And wonderful stories illustrated women’s deeper love for God and Muhammad than for their husbands. For example, a woman defied her consort’s sexual dominance by giving one of her braids covered with emeralds to the Prophet Muhammad, asking him to sell its precious stones for the sake of the poor. The husband, enraged, planned to kill her and invited her brothers for dinner. They asked her to remove her scarf, but her braid had miraculously grown back, more beautiful than ever, and ornamented with brighter stones. The light from the stones, indicating the presence of God, illuminated the whole room and dazzled her husband and brothers who repented and became Muslim. Another woman, Asiya, a famous martyr of the faith, lived under the terror of her husband, the pharaoh, with whom Moses dealt. She prayed at night in secret and her husband, who epitomized pure evil, had her killed in the middle

103. Fāzā‘īl, 28–29, 31–33.
104. Fāzā‘īl, 28, 33.
of her prayer. Such a story could easily delight an apostate feminine audience: Asiya lived in a hostile pagan environment and pharaoh could be identified with any representative of Russian power. However, even when partners were Muslim, a woman still had to choose God over her husband and had the right to quit any relationship with her mate if the latter failed to be a good Muslim, in particular if he drank alcoholic beverages or strayed away from the Muslim path. Women were also entitled to revolt if they were subjected to abuse.

A closer look at relationships between men and women in Sufi books shows that women's devotion to their husbands mirrored their husbands' devotion to God, and their patience and self-denial also played an active role in their husbands' spiritual journey. Their stories served as models of behavior for both men and women. In the fantastic Turkic epic, *Kisekbash*, which children memorized at the *maktab*, a wife and mother cried and prayed until 'Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law, came with his sword and freed her from the Div. Spiritually active, her prayers echoed her husband's reading of the Qur'an—the latter had lost his body while fighting the demon, but his decapitated head could still pray—and her unique devotion kept the giant from raping and devouring her, giving her husband and 'Ali enough time to reach the well where she was kept prisoner. Without her spiritual participation, the tale would have ended with the giant's victory, 'Ali would not have killed the Div, and the Prophet Muhammad would have been unable to repair her husband's body and resuscitate her son. Popular consciousness could easily substitute the Div for the Russian colonial power, and the deliverer, 'Ali, for the Ottoman Sultan. After the troops entered apostate villages to stop the rebellion and divide families, separated couples prayed together from their prison's cell or place of exile to paralyze their enemy's powers—expecting the coming of a more powerful eschatological deliverer, as promised to them by itinerant Sufi preachers.

Women could also compete with men in matters of religious knowledge. Even shaykhs could learn lessons from their wives. Against his violent objection, Naqshband's wife proved to her husband that learning was essential to spiritual advancement. Disguising herself as the angel Gabriel, she told two students that each would be a prophet: the ignorant student believed her, but the learned one saw through her deception, called her "devil," and chased her with a knife. Again in this story, the woman played a satanic role that corroborated with an earlier image of women in Sufi literature, but her natural "devilishness" by then had been transformed into an instrument of faith. This transformation echoed the one experienced by other actors in Sufi works. Like the inhabitants of the supernatural or pre-Muslim world (spirits of dead ancestors or pagan gods who converted to Islam), women came to serve the prophets and their close friends.

Mothers were also models, guardians, and nurturers of the faith. In *The Book of Mary* by Sulayman Baqirghani, a disciple of Khoja Ahmad Yasawi, Mary set the norm

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107. *Kisekbash kitābī*, 9. Apostates continued praying five times a day in their prison cells and once liberated, boasted that noone kept them from doing it, NART, f. 1, op. 3, d. 227, l. 79.
for segregated prayer. She asked her son to build a mosque so she could retire and pray separately. She also rose from the dead in response to the prayers of her desperate and lonely son, gently reproached him for his lack of faith and summoned him to continue his mission. Similarly, when Joseph cried on his mother’s tomb, her voice sounded forth from the grave and taught him patience and hope. In these accounts, mothers’ role consisted in strengthening their children’s faith when the latter was challenged by adversarial forces. They were the ones who brought up their children to serve God, and reminded them of their religious duties. In Rabghuzi’s tales, Mary took her son to school, advising the teacher to beat less and teach more. 109

Mothers’ discontent could have devastating effects on their children’s life and afterlife. Mothers who felt offended could perform evil prayers. Their prayers would be automatically granted in the same way God answered the prophets’ requests. A son who used to call his mother names was changed into a donkey after his mother prayed to God; others were ashamed in public for sexual misconduct and ended up in hell. The degree of the offense could be relatively trivial (a mother remembered that her son did not appreciate one of her dishes), but outweighed any good actions that the son could have previously done. A mother’s anathema could also strike an exemplary worshiper. Biktashi reported that a hermit neglected to answer his mother’s request while he was performing a supererogatory prayer. Furious, she asked God to throw him in prison with other debauchees. As a result of her prayer, the hermit was accused of having made the king’s daughter pregnant. Suspecting that his mother had cursed him, the innocent hermit prayed to God who made the newborn speak. As in the tale of Joseph, the baby exonerated the hermit from the crime. 110

The children’s unconditional deference to their mother is also attested in other Islamic cultures. On Lamu, an island belonging to Kenya, entrance to paradise was conditional upon the mother’s consent. People warned children not to displease their mother by referring to a hadith that says: “Paradise is under the feet of the mothers.” There is, however, a difference between the Lamuans’ and the Tatars’ understanding of this hadith. The mothers in Fāżā’il ash-Shühūr actually pronounced a curse, which indicates that women could, with the help of God, exert their influence over men by supernatural means. At first glance, Biktashi’s women appear to be “sorceresses,” hardly controllable even by those who strictly followed the Sufi path. On the one hand, the hermit’s story associated women with illicit sex, magic, and evil; on the other, it acknowledged the power of women in their progeny’s lives. The author even justified the hermit’s mother’s anathema by saying that a mother’s request superseded a supererogatory prayer. This suggests that women’s magic powers, as much as pagan spirits, were under the control of Islamic law. Although they sent their children to the local parish schools, apostate Kräshen women of Buinsk district threatened to curse them if they read Russian books after school. Likewise, apostates in Staraia Ikshurma expressed their unwillingness to

return to Christianity by declaring to the missionary Mashanov that they feared their mother’s anathema.\textsuperscript{111}

In Sufi tradition, not only could women be seekers of God and powerful mothers, but their religious duties were not tied to marriage. If God wished, they could live alone as dervishes. In Qiṣṣa-yi Yūsuf, one rich woman converted to Islam after seeing Joseph and distributed her wealth to the poor and dervishes before she herself became a seeker of God and retired in a cell. Women could also be equal to the prophets as miracle workers. Fatima, the Prophet’s daughter, known as the first qutb (great Saint) in Sufism, was a popular intercessory female figure. It was said that after she prayed, invisible hands built a mosque in one night and that on Judgment Day she would intercede for all pious women.\textsuperscript{112} Tombs of female Sufi saints, quite common in the Middle Volga but rarely entered into Russian archeological descriptions of the Kazan province, did not fail to attract pilgrims of multiethnic origin. Such was the case of ‘Ayşä Bikä’s grave, daughter of a Prophet’s companion near the village of Tatarskaia Aisha, whose tomb had such charisma that even Russian peasants feared to till the lands around it.\textsuperscript{113}

Stories involving pious, anonymous women were also used as models for proper Islamic behavior. One woman, who had no kinship with any prophet or saint, refused to interrupt her prayers even when the devil threw her child into a burning pit; miraculously, the child suffered no harm. When Jesus learned of this, he told her husband: “If your wife were a man, she would be a prophet.” In Fāţā’il ash-Shūhūr, popular traditional Sufi symbols such as a tree, light, and gems beautifully enhanced Rabghuzi’s more sober narrative: not only did the child play with burning charcoal, but he was shaded and nourished by a fruit tree that sprang up in the pit; even the fiery coals became precious stones in this version of the story. Similar to the Tree of Life with its roots in heaven (an image frequently used in Sufism), the tree in Biktashi’s story reflected the presence of God in the heart of the believer (as if the woman’s constant prayer had watered the tree), and the precious stones mirrored the divine light. Images of trees and gardens appear in other miraculous stories, involving masculine figures such as the Prophet Muhammad or al-Khidr.\textsuperscript{114}

Tatar epics, tales, and historical traditions reinforced the positive image of women in religious literature and demonstrated that women’s actions were far from being limited to the domestic sphere. They showed in actual accounts how important the women’s mission was in both spreading Islam and resisting foreign invaders. Before the Mongol invasion, historical traditions reported that itinerant women dervishes, armed with iron sticks, traveled each day between Bolghar and Bülär (now Biliarsk village), instructing people in the sharia. The head of the order was no less than Tuy Bikä, who was symbolically impregnated with Islamic knowledge in the steam bath

\textsuperscript{111} Abdul Hamid M. el Zein, The Sacred Meadows: A Structural Analysis of Religious Symbolism in an East African Town (Evanston, IL, 1974), 66; Otdel rukopisei Kazanskoi nauchnoi biblioteki im. Lobachevskogo, f. 7, ed. khr. 2, l. 23 ob.; NART, f. 967, op. 1, d. 8, l. 12 ob.


\textsuperscript{113} Otdel rukopisei Kazanskoi nauchnoi biblioteki im. Lobachevskogo, f. 7, ed. khr. 1, l. 189/1 ob.; A. Iablokov, “O pochitanii sviatykh v Islamie,” PS 29, pt. 3 (1883): 424; Frank, Islamic Historiography, 71.

\textsuperscript{114} Fāţā’il, 19; al-Rabghūzī, Stories, vol. 2: 493–494.
conversion story. Like male shaykhs, she sent her female students off to other lands to teach Islam. Tatar historical tales spoke also of khans’ daughters sent to neighboring cities to receive proper instruction and used their knowledge to fight their enemies. Thus, the twelve daughters of a Bolghar king who reigned over the city of Märijän first studied in the madrasa of Rabiya, a female teacher in the ancient city of Bülär, before fighting Mongol pagan invaders who took them prisoners. Thanks to their piety, God saved them from being buried alive and changed them into twelve stars.  

The Tatar folklorist Fatykh Urmancheev has rightly emphasized the importance of these heroic maidens in Tatar epics. The Bolghar khan’s daughter, Altïnchäch (literally, gold hair), refused to marry the Mongol khan, armed herself, and entered the battle. Although wounded, she never subjugated herself to the infidel. The same type of legends flourished against Russians. Queen Söyem Bikä (ca. 1516–after 1554?), who ruled the Khanate of Kazan from 1549 until 1551 in the name of her minor son Ütämesh–Gäräy, was and remains an important symbol of resistance. Both because of her tragic destiny and because of her relation to important figures who played a role in the Islamization and defense of the land against invaders, she came to echo her ancestors’ epic struggle for Islam. Daughter of Yusuf (d. 1554), the ruler of the Noghay horde, one of the kingdoms that arose after the breakup of the Golden Horde, she descended from the famous Khan Idegäy (1352–1419), founder of the Noghay confederation and a subject of popular epics, who fought for the integrity of his domain against Khan Tokhtamïsh (1350–1406), ruler of the Golden Horde and Central Asia. Idegäy was also depicted in Turkic historiographical mythology as a descendant of the first successor to the Prophet Muhammad, the Rightly-Guided Caliph Abu Bakr, and as a figure responsible for the Islamization of his own people. Legends also affirmed that he descended from Baba Tükles, a Sufi saint who was responsible for the Islamization of the Golden Horde.

Among Tatars and Islamized Kräshens, Queen Söyem Bikä embodied her ancestors’ exploits for the spread of Islam and struggle for freedom. Popular traditions liked to recall that she predicted the fall of the Kazan Khanate, brought poisoned food to Shah ‘Ali who was Ivan the Terrible’s candidate on the throne of Kazan, and appeared in arms to defend her beloved city of Kazan in 1550. Her famous epic, written in the first person and chanted by the apostate women of Elyshevo, told her tragic ordeal before and after the fall of the khanate. Because Tatar nobles refused to listen to her, Ivan the Terrible took Kazan in 1552 and had her son baptized a year later. As if

115. Tatar khaliq ijati, 27, 36–37, 38–39; Tuy Bikä is believed to be buried in Bolghar. “Shähri Bolghar äwliyaları,” in Qotdus Khösnullin, Mönäjätlär häm bäyetlär (Köyläp uqugha nigezlänğän janrlar) (Kazan, 2001), 521.
history repeated itself, the Cossacks and representatives of the Orthodox Church took
the children of apostates away from their parents to baptize them forcibly.  

Tatar religious and historical narratives suggest further that women had the
potential to change history in the public and political sphere. As seen before, women
did leave the domestic sphere when necessary; first, if their husbands were unable to
provide for the family’s well-being; second, if they were called by God to live a celibate
life or engage in proselytizing. In historical narratives, women even engaged in battle
if their father, husband, faith, or people were endangered, but in most cases, their
lives ended tragically. Women could also exercise enough influence to achieve their
political objectives successfully. A Bolghar queen, also well known for her courage
and intelligence, whose husband had been killed by Tamerlane, knew how to talk and
surround herself with good advisers. After hearing that Tamerlane spared those who
acknowledged that God had punished them for being bad Muslims, she took her two
sons to Tamerlane, repented and reported to the blood-thirsty invader that he was the
true representative of the Muslim path. Tamerlane let her settle down in the land of
her choice (Kazan), where the queen built new mosques and madrasas. The Bolghar
queen’s legend illustrated and added a new dimension to the historical significance of
women in the society. It showed that women could exert influence on strong political
figures, be the promoter of an ever-perfecting Islamic society even in the context of
foreign domination, and play a role in the symbolic reconstruction of the past. The
queen—not her sons—mediated between two different periods of Tatar history, as a
crucial genetic and historical link.  

There is no doubt that Sufi and historical legendary accounts described women
as being inherently limited in the religious sphere by their nature. They could not be
prophets, but they could overcome their natural limitations, unite with the divine,
and perform miracles. They could also act like prophets, but without bearing the title.
More important, they exercised control over male relatives in matters of marital alli-
iances as well as social and religious customs, by playing a special role in the transmis-
sion of proper Islamic behavior (adab). They could also be a threat in the supernatural
sphere. God accepted mistreated mothers’ prayers automatically in the same way
He responded to His prophets’ wishes. Women also understood the importance of
knowledge. Finally, their activities went much beyond the domestic sphere; they were
defenders and reproducers of their faith and played their part in the history of their
people against pagan, infidel, and ruthless Muslim invaders.

Sacred Topography as a Source of Islamic Knowledge

Along with books, talismans, and sacred images, Sufi legends attached to sacred
places and funerary inscriptions helped diffuse Islamic conceptions of the afterlife
to a larger audience. The earliest childhood memories of Khäsän Tufan, born in an
apostate village, included the fantastic tales of the prophets and the tragic stories con-
ected to the sacred graves. Almost every Tatar village had a cemetery with one, two,

119. The text of Söyembikä bäyete can be found in the diary of Mahisärwär, daughter of the under-
ground mullah of Elyshevo, Ibrahim Bikmökhämmätov (l. 71).
120. Tatar khatiq ijati, 46.
or even three tombs of Muslim saints. Any simple tombstone with an epitaph dating from the Bolghar kingdom or Kazan Khanate, cemetery, spring, qurghan (tumulus), or ditch that signaled the presence of ancient dwellings attracted numerous Tatar pilgrims from Kazan and the surrounding districts. Objects found on these sites, such as human bones, arrows, pottery, or coats of mail, were attached to children’s necks or to their käläpüsh and functioned as talismans. Biktashi’s marvelous stories supported the belief in the sacredness of this geography: Jewish shaykhs prayed to God inside a hill (taw) or a huge rock on top of a hill, waiting for Muhammad to come. Both the hill and the rock could talk about their hosts, who hundreds of years ago had fallen in love with the Prophet and his disciples. These saints, as a sign of support from God, were adorned with precious stones and grapes.\textsuperscript{121}

Jadids looked at these sacred places with great skepticism, fearing that the saints’ miracles could be interpreted as manifestations of their own power, although Sufi literature such as \textit{Risālá-yi Āzīzā} drew a very strict distinction between miracles performed in the name of God and tricks performed by magicians. The first disagreement that the historian Togan had with his father, a Naqshbandi shaykh, regarded the healing power of Shaykh Muhammad Baha’ ad-Din Naqshband’s tomb near Bukhara. Shocked, his mother, a well-educated woman, blamed his skepticism on Russian schooling. But it was not Russian influence. The reformist theologian Fākr ad-Din ridiculed the villagers’ inability to explain the origins of those shrines, relying on specific strong hadith. Another reformist, the novelist Zahir Bigiyev (1870–1902), characterized Astrakhan Tatars’ fascination with their sacred cemeteries as a form of polytheism, comparing it to the Nazarenes’ (i.e., Christians) worship of images and their view of Jesus, a fatherless child, as God. The burgeoning number of sacred tombs, he wrote, was akin to the high frequency of Marian apparitions. But Fākr ad-Din or Bigiyev’s observations had little impact. In 1914, the historian ‘Ali Räkhim (1892–1943) reported that his countrymen continued to hang scarves and sacrifice roosters at the site of ancient Bolghar city, abandoning themselves to what he called “fetishism.”\textsuperscript{122}

Despite the jadids’ criticisms, those sites and the legends that surrounded them played an important role in delineating communal boundaries between those who adhered to Islam and those who had departed from it. In the Tatar-Krâshen apostate village of Bakyrchy, Sviiazhsk district, a tradition related that a sixteenth-century saint who had taught in the neighboring Chuvash village of Azbaba, Sviiazhsk district, had asked specifically to be buried in Bakyrchy and not in Azbaba. Disappointed that his Chuvash disciples had reverted to their old pagan ways while he was away in Mecca and Istanbul, the saint rejected these backsliders and chose Bakyrchy as his final resting place. The tradition, which dated back to the seventeenth century, still reflected actual divisions on the ground. Thus the Tatar scholar Nasïri, who recorded

\textsuperscript{121} Khasan Tufan, “O sebe,” in \textit{Stikhotvoreniia} (Moscow, 1970), 5, 10; S. M. Shpilevskii, \textit{Drevnie goroda i drugie bulgarsko-tatarskie pamiatniki v Kazanskoi gubernii} (Kazan, 1877), 496; Fâzâ’îl, 35–36, 38–39.

the story in 1873, neglected to report the presence of a “new convert” community in Bakyrchy, suggesting that his native informants (and himself) understood these baptized Tatars to be part of the village’s Islamic space. Conversely, Azbaba was still living in religious liminality: baptized Tatars had indeed apostatized but Orthodox Chuvash remained faithful to the church. (At the beginning of the twentieth century Chuvash welcomed the opening of a St. Gurii school while Muslim Tatars and apostates succeeded in opening a mosque and a maktab in 1914.) Most important, the shrines served as meeting points for all people of the Middle Volga, regardless of their faith. In the same way Qol ’Ali’s tale of Joseph claimed that the Prophet Joseph’s grave had the same beneficial influence on Muslims and non-Muslims and drew many converts, the sacred shrines of Kazan province could potentially serve as a conduit for further Islamization.123

Until the 1870s, Tatars had more authority than Russians over the baptized religious landscape. They had recuperated many centers of animist cults, and their myths of origin often dominated the local discursive account of their sacrality. When questioned by archeologists and missionaries about the origin of the sacred places, Krâshëns who were still attached to their indigenous beliefs, referred to the Muslim Tatar traditions rather than to animist traditions even though these places had been and were still kirämät (a term that signified both protective spirits and the sites where those spirits were worshiped). Near Vladimirova village in Mamadysh district, a little hill was sacred to both starokreshchenye and Muslims. With its forest and spring, the site had all the characteristics of a kirämät: Tatars and Krâshëns affirmed that in thirty years the hill had grown, the sign of a saint’s presence (this belief echoed Biktashi’s stories of shaykhs praying inside rocks). Both Krâshëns and Tatars near the village contended that Allah had elevated this hill to remind people of His presence, and women during the first signs of labor climbed it ten times, repeating the name of God, a ritual that had all the characteristics of a Sufi litany. Starokreshchenye who venerated a nearby spring of “living water” used a story recounted by their Muslim neighbors to explain the spring’s sacrality. (According to the Muslim Tatars, God had created “living water” that would assure humanity eternal life, but the Devil tasted it before man, and so condemned him to death.) Krâshëns sacrificed white bulls to the spring’s spirit and ate botqa (cream of wheat) in order to ensure a good wheat harvest, and Muslim Tatars came to the site to pray their Muslim prayers and participated in the communal ceremonies surrounding the hill.124

Until the late 1850s, Muslim Kazan Tatars used to bring offerings (money, food, or animals) to the kirämät. Those sites—a spring, a lake, a river, or a small forest, usually fenced—were found near Tatar, Krâshen, Mari, and Chuvash hamlets. Tatar families in Kazan province hung bags in one corner of their houses, as did Krâshëns, placing change in them; with those savings, they bought animals, white horses or geese, and sacrificed them on a kirämät site. A special group in the village called

qart (elders) performed the sacrifice in order to appease the kirämät and gain their blessings: good health, healthy livestock, and favorable harvest. Mullahs shared the meal and received the skin of the sacrificial animal whose unbroken bones were carefully buried in a purified space. Muslim kïirâzâ (medicine men, sorcerers) also served as intermediaries between men and the spirits’ world. Even superficially Islamized Krâshens visited them whenever they or their cattle got sick.125

The common belief in the kirämät or spirits was so strong in Mamadysh district in the middle of the 1860s that one of Timofeev’s students, a Krâshen boy, roused a Krâshen and a Tatar woman to indignation when he argued that the kirämät did not exist. Fäkhr ad-Dîn, then a young teacher in the village of Nizhnïe Shelcheli, stirred the same outrage among other teachers of the madrasa when he declared that no päris (a word of Persian origin that designated house spirits with a dark human face and one eye on their forehead) or jinns haunted the baths and the library. Shocked, his opponents exclaimed: “The Qur’an mentions the existence of evil spirits. How will you prove the contrary?”126

Until the late 1880s, Tatârs believed that spirits brought diseases. When a child got sick, he or she was asked to write the name of a man he saw, and then the paper was burned, but if the child remained quiet, people screamed “why don’t you see anybody?” and even went as far as hitting the child until “the spirit came out.” In 1875, Tatârs still sacrificed chickens, cows, and fish, but on a much smaller scale. Krâshens, those who had not apostatized, continued to perform those ceremonies actively, following a Christian agrarian calendar, but uttering their prayers in Arabic, to reinforce their efficacy.127 At the beginning of the twentieth century, Kazan Tatârs, under the strong influence of little Islamic brochures and Bîddâwâm denouncing the cult of kirämät trees, were less inclined to bring sacrifices to the protective, potentially harmful spirits. But in 1914, the reformist theologian Fäkhr ad-Dîn still felt it necessary to warn Tatârs against sacrificing animals on fenced spaces, frightening children with local spirits, and visiting village sorcerers.128

In apostate Elyshevo, which included baptized converts of Tatâr and Udmurt origin, the sacred landscape did not differ much from that in other villages attached to the cult of the kirämät. It also had a sacred hill, spring, and tree. Elderly people still recall that Udmurts, Tatârs, and Krâshens visited their sacred kirämät tree, which is still of an impressive size with its four trunks emerging from a single basis and a spring flowing underneath. In “pagan times,” I was told, Udmurts prayed to the

126. Il’minskii, ed., Kazanskaia tsentral’naia tsentr'al’naia, 135; Ivan Pîtsyn, “Religioznoe nrasvstennoe sostojanie pravoslavnîkh Tatâr” (Kursovoe sochinenie, 1916), in NART, f. 10, op. 2, d. 1360, l. 182; Rizaetdin Fäkhretdin, Tàrjemäi khälem (Ufa, September 1938), in Rizaetdin Fäkhretdin: Fänni-biografi k jïyïntïq (Kazan, 1999), 23–26. Fäkhr ad-Dîn also warned mothers not to frighten children with spirits (päris, jinns) in Târbïyäle ana (Kazan, 1898), 7, and forbid them to turn to Chuuvash, Chereemis, or Mordvin female healers in Târbïyäle khättan (Kazan, 1899), 29.
128. Bîddâwâm kitâbï, 3; Mîrjânî, Mustaqâm, 1: 23; Iakov Koblov, Mifologiia Kazanskikh tatar (Kazan, 1910), 38; Fäkhr ad-Dîn, Jâwâmî, 160–166 (hadith no. 104), 224–228 (hadith no. 144), 322–323 (hadith no. 200), 328–332 (hadith no. 204), 332–334 (hadith no. 206), 348–349 (hadith no. 214), 367–368 (hadith no. 228), 373 (hadith no. 235), 396–401 (hadith no. 256), 522–523 (hadith no. 336).
healing spirit who resided in the tree and whose story is long forgotten. People of Elyshevo still apply water from the spring to ailing parts of their body, but only after offering Muslim prayers. In times of drought, women led by Mahisärwär, the daughter of the underground mullah Ibrahim Bikmökhämätäv, read Muslim prayers at the top of the kirämät mount and near the sacred tomb of an orphan girl whose name has been forgotten. As was the case in villages still attached to the worship of nature spirits, people continued the practice of cooking and eating botqa at this special event.129

Besides kirämät centers of worship, Muslims, Christian Tatars, and other indigenous peoples visited Muslim sacred tombs. These shrines belonged to ascetics who had performed miracles as evidence of their sanctity, great teachers who had founded new settlements and played an important role in the Islamization of their region, or martyrs killed by the pagan Mongols, Tamerlane, or the infidel Russians. The Qur’an’s comforting words affirmed that God’s martyrs were not really dead, and various hadith supported the idea by asserting that the friends of God could even hear their visitors’ petitions.130 Through Uwaysi spiritual communication, as was the case of shaykh Habibullah in Yalchïghol’s treatise, dead saints could initiate new disciples in prayer or in their dreams. Such miraculous gifts—prophecy, teaching, and healing—were perceived as God’s power working for or through his friend, dead or alive. These could happen from the saint’s own volition or involuntarily.131

While reciting their primer Sharā’īṭ al-İmān, Tatar and baptized children learned that the inhabitants of these sacred tombs and their ancestors had a privileged Central Asian spiritual link to the Prophet Muhammad through the Yasawiyya initiatic chain (silśāla). They also learned to identify themselves with three other Sufi Central Asian communities: the Naqshbandiyya through Muhammad Baha’ ad-Din Naqshband’s dead Uwaysi elder, ‘Abd al-Khaliq Ghijdewani (d. 1179–1180), born near Bukhara, who introduced the constant practice of the silent zikr; the Kubrawiyya through Najm ad-Din Kubra, killed in 1221 during the Mongol invasion of Khorezm, whose disciples converted many Mongols to Islam; and the ‘Ishqiyya through Abu’l-Hasan ‘Ishqi, a possible contemporary and competitor of Muhammad Baha’ ad-Din Naqshband in the fourteenth century.132

If sacred places served as a source of immediate Qur’anic knowledge and as a meeting point between Muslims and their “pagan” (animist) prospects, they were not strictly speaking Islamic centers for all visitors. Starokreshchenye, for their part,
rendered Muslim saints the veneration due to dead ancestors and clan or village founders. Thus, in Mamadysh district, even Kräshens who diligently fulfilled their Christian obligations after the implementation of Il’minski’s schooling brought offerings to the tomb of saint Idris Khalifa, near the village of Teberdi Chally (or Chelny in Russian) in Laishevo district, and to his female descendants, the caretakers, to ward off disease and poor harvests. The mother of the famous Kräshen historian and publicist Maksim Glukhov (1937–2003) recalled that the saint whom she named “Kälpä babay” or “Khafiz äwliyä Khälfä babay” had brought her people, the Kräshens, from beyond the Kama to the safe and prosperous Chally area with his magic staff, which led the way. For Tatars, saint Idris trained many other itinerant teachers and for fifteen years was a “Bolghar” student of the Eastern Turkestan Yasawian teacher Shaykh Hidayatullah (d. 1694), who spread Islam and founded new settlements among “pagans” in the Chally area. Some sources indicated that among Idris’s most famous students was Shaykh Qasim Khoja who proselytized in the Kukmor, Alaty, and Saratov regions, and whose tomb in Kazan also inspired the starokreshchenye of Tashkirmen’ village in Laishevo district and novokreshchenye of Chistopol’ district to bring alms, chickens, geese, and eggs to his descendants. Well after the Russian Revolution of 1917, starokreshchenye of Mamadysh district still came to the tomb of shaykh Idris in time of personal or communal strife, or whenever they saw the saint in their sleep despite Märjani’s critique of the saint’s veneration in Kazan. The Kräshens’ attitude toward the saint was comparable to the Maris who brought offerings to their gods or warrior ancestors in order to conciliate them whenever they saw them in dream.

Indeed, Kräshens, Chuvash attached to their indigenous beliefs, Muslims, and apostates who made pilgrimages to the same sacred sites came for different reasons. At the Khojas’ mountain near Biliarsk lay the resting place of three Muslim saints. The Chuvash considered one of them, Maghlum Khoja, as a Chuvash spirit, a prophet, and an ancient king; but for the apostates of Samigulov’s village, Biliarsk was the burial site of a saint not mentioned in Tatar hagiographies, who was the commander-in-chief for a princess who ruled the Bolghar town of Tubîlghïtaw.


(in Russian, Verkhniaia Nikitkina). After Ivan the Terrible took her city, apostates recalled, the czar forcibly baptized her army, but her commander-in-chief refused to give up his faith and became a famous shaykh. Even if animistic Kräshens and Chuvash regarded these saints as village founders, they still recognized the mullahs’ intercessory powers and entrusted their sacrifices to them. Mullahs killed the desired animal (a sheep, goat, goose, duck, rooster, or a chicken depending on their means), recited the thirty-sixth Sura Yā Sīn, and asked God to fulfill their wishes. The sacrifices took place after pilgrims had reached the foot of the hill where the friends of God were buried. The pilgrims performed several prostrations, climbed the hill on their knees, prayed, and descended back on their knees always facing the tomb. They also drank at the sacred spring and had a copious meal in honor of their saintly hosts. Of utmost importance, the meals included both Muslims and non-Muslims.

Finally, sacred sites, no matter how pilgrims related to the saint, succeeded in forging a common native religious culture, capable of containing Russian encroachment. If necessary, Kräshens and Muslims joined forces to protect their sacred sites against Russian intrusion. Thus, in 1870, the starokreshchenye of Tashkirmen’, otherwise despised by their Muslim neighbors as having no religion at all, and whose genealogies included Chuvash kin, allied with Muslim Tatar pilgrims from Kazan to stop archeological excavations at a nearby ancient cemetery, located on Russian land, containing the grave of a saint whom they venerated on different days. In general, because of the cosmology and history they shared with the other indigenous peoples of the Middle Volga, the Muslim Tatars, represented by the mullah or the heirs of a saint, possessed far greater authority over pilgrimage sites than did the Orthodox Church. Even after the discovery of a miraculous icon, the clergy of Biliarsk was still unable to compete successfully with the shrine complex of the Khojas’ mountain, which Kräshens, Chuvash, and Mordvins continued to visit.

Islamic Knowledge Tested

In past historiographical studies of Tatar education, there has been no attempt to evaluate the level of retention of students’ knowledge and determine how Kräshens and their Tatar neighbors read and interpreted Muslim books and legends surrounding their sacred places. Because apostates or baptized Tatars failed to refer to explicit Qur’anic texts or passages in their speech, Eastern Orthodox missionaries generally


held that apostates spoke in their name, which in their view meant that they knew nothing of Islam. Actually, the Krâşhens’ religious discourse, be they at different stages of Islamization or Christianization, reflected much of the spirit of the oral and written culture that neighboring Tatars were exposed to at home, in primary Qur’anic schools, and at the site of their shrines. In other words, traditional education fulfilled its basic function of gaining more converts to the faith and solidifying communal boundaries in the case of infidel encroachment.  

The Krâşhens’ religious knowledge, as reconstructed from Krâşhen and missionary diaries or local “apostate” village traditions, was indeed a complex mix of Islamic, Christian, and animist beliefs in ancestor and nature spirits. It varied from one individual to another or one village to another. Even Krâşhens who held more firmly to their animist beliefs and later remained strongly Christian acknowledged some particularities of the Islamic faith. Others, the “apostates” who had officially declared their Islamic identity, posited more firmly the superiority of Islam over ancestral beliefs and Christianity. Their discourse, however, presented unique particularities in great part because they continued to experience some form of ostracism from their immediate Tatar neighbors, which they conveyed through their village traditions and tales. Not only were apostates obliged to defend their faith against Eastern Orthodox missionaries’ critics, but they were also drawn to define it against the prejudice held by some, but not all, of their Tatar neighbors who still looked at them as “traitors” or *murtadd*, that is “apostates from Islam.”

A Krâşhen anecdote humorously exemplified the converts’ ambivalent situation in the 1860s–1870s. A tailor (*kiyimche*), it said, could not find a shelter in a Tatar village until he pretended to know how to pray the Islamic way, but when it came time to do the congregational prayer, the Krâşhen stood helpless until his Tatar host, upset by his attitude, kicked him in the behind to bow appropriately. Instead, he kicked the prayer leader in exactly the same place. When the surprised mullah asked why he was kicked, the Krâşhen’s answer was that he thought this was the way Muslims prayed. The mullah though did not scold the Krâşhen, but the Tatar parishioner. Clearly the anecdote praised the Krâşhens’ cunning, mocked the Tatars’ exclusiveness, but dignified the mullah for his sense of justice. Indeed, to their Tatar neighbors, apostate Krâşhens and individuals committed to their salvation reminded that divine mercy was universal and not tied to history.  

Popular Islamic discourse among the Krâşhens and their Tatar neighbors, with its Sufi and anti-Christian components, can be reconstructed with all its complexities and shades around three areas of belief: God and his attributes, the divine revelation, and the Last Judgment. Apostates held a view of God similar to that of Sunni Islam but they stressed His differences with the Christian God and His mercy. God was unique, omniscient, and omnipotent, a view, in their minds, quite different from and superior to that of the Russian Orthodox. Christians believed that God had a human body and occupied a defined space called heaven. In fact, God was not a created being,

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limited in space by a material body. No one could indicate where He lived, whether in heaven or on earth, to the right or to the left, said a Tatar of Artyk, Mamadysh district, who proselytized among Kräshens. Allah saw everything, heard everything, and knew everything. A baptized seasonal tailor told the missionaries that a shaykh once ordered three of his disciples to steal a hen and eat it in secret. The first two did as the shaykh commanded, but the third brought the hen to his teacher. When asked why he had not eaten the hen, the disciple answered, “I could find no place to do it in secret; even where no man could see me, God could see me.” The teacher responded, “You have chosen well; the two others did not know that God sees everything.” As the only true God, He could not have a son or a wife, as did pagan gods. As for ‘Isa (Jesus), the Russians identified him as the Son of God or even—a greater blasphemy!—God himself. To the horror of the Orthodox missionaries, the apostates considered the Christian mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation as pure idolatry. For the apostates, the cross was no more than a ladder that permitted Mary’s son to climb into heaven (a story reported by a seasonal tailor of Elyshevo village); to venerate it, as the Orthodox did, was to violate the first commandment.

Kräshens often heard from itinerant preachers that God was merciful. He did not hold the Kräshens responsible for the sins of their fathers. If they repented, they would have first place in the house of God. Moreover, God did not demand great efforts from his creatures. He asked only that the Kräshens recite the shahada as often as possible, when they arose and when they went to bed, and they would go to paradise with the Muslims because God knew that they were simple creatures. Of the Maris of Ufa, who found the Arabic prayers of the Muslims very difficult to learn, God asked only that they repeat the Tatar phrase Äy, Alla saqlasïn (God preserve us!) ninety-nine times without stopping. Such constant repetition of the same short prayer was reminiscent of the vocal and silent techniques the Sufi brotherhoods used during their congregational prayers. Islamic discourse in the non-Muslim milieu echoed the primer Sharâ’it al-Imân’s recommendation to pray in türki, using a tafsir, in case the Arabic language presented problems; however, the author’s advice related specifically to prayers at funerals. If one compares the 1860s and the 1890s, however, a larger number of starokreshchence in Apazovo knew the time, the direction, the words, and the names of the five Muslim prayers in Arabic, along with their Christian prayers in Il’minskii’s vernacular translation.

Finally, God was on the side of the Kräshens who had been ostracized from their Muslim brothers after their baptism. A legend in Bol’shie Kibiak-Kozi (Oli Kibä-Khuja in Laishevo district, also called before the Revolution Keräshen Kibä-Khujaï
in Tatar) narrates that before the time of Ivan the Terrible, there was one village, Kibä-Khuja. When Ivan the Terrible invaded the Kazan state, some accepted to be baptized but others resisted. The village then divided in two: Verkhnie Kibiak-Kozi (Yugharï Kibä-Khuja), which remained Muslim; and Bol’shie Kibiak-Kozi, which was comprised of Kräshens. On the site of the original village now abandoned two stones fell from the sky. The inhabitants of Muslim Verkhnie Kibiak-Kozi wished to appropriate the miraculous stones since Bol’shie Kibiak-Kozi had shamed itself by apostatizing from Islam. But a hurricane prevented the villagers from taking the stones. The village elders, taking it as a sign from God, decided to leave the stones on the site of the original village, a pilgrimage destination for inhabitants of both villages. Besides illustrating the tensions between the nonbaptized and the baptized, the legend taught that even when men had shown signs of contempt and abandonment, God still cared for the Kräshens’ salvation, a message also spread by itinerant Sufi teachers. The “flying stone” was a motif frequently mentioned in the popular Sufi culture of the Ottoman Empire, near Skopje and in Asia Minor. People attributed healing properties to them and believed that they had been “flown” from Mecca on a saint’s request.

According to a starokreshchenyi of Elyshevo, who repeated a line from Risālä-yi Nurnāmā, a popular treatise about the Light of Muhammad, God had revealed himself several times, in four divine books: the Torah (the Law of Moses), the Zäbur (the Psalms of David), the Injil (the Gospel), and the Qur’an. The last book was the object of special veneration by both literate and illiterate Kräshens. The missionary Malov offended an old woman of Elyshevo when he pointed out her inability to comprehend the second Sura he was reading. She answered sharply, “maybe so, but I know that it’s the Word of the Qur’an.” The Qur’an, the Word of God, was the last and most highly elevated of the divine books. It replaced all the revealed books that had preceded it, which according to the Muslims had been distorted by the Christians and the Jews. The Muslims spread the rumor among the Kräshens that the Russians had changed the names of the prophets Ibrahim, Iskhak, Yusuf, and Süleyman mentioned in the Injil; Ibrahim, for example, had been changed to Abraham. When Malov tried to read Il’minskii’s translation of the Gospel in Tatar, the same old woman retreated to the woman’s area of the house and hid behind a curtain. Some literate Kräshens familiar with Muslim teaching and the Russian language compared the Bible and the Qur’an to the advantage of the latter. A Kräshen of Nikiforova, a village later regained for the cause of Christianity, told Timofeev that in The Book of Joseph the story of the prophet was far more detailed than in Genesis and would not listen to the missionary’s counterarguments.

Kräshens, both apostates and nonapostates, knew that God spoke through prophets. They recited a number of stories about Adam, Noah, Abraham (Ibrahim’s
sacrifice of Ishmael was particularly popular), Joseph, Job, Moses, Solomon, and Jonah from the Qur’anic tradition, which differed from the Hebraic-Christian traditions. Thus Krâshens, who continued to adhere to their indigenous beliefs, did not use the Babel tower story from Genesis to explain why people spoke different languages but rather used popular tales of the prophets, which claimed that the Prophet Adam had seventy sons from whom originated multiple languages. Apostates of Elyshevo liked to narrate stories about how the Prophet Solomon dominated the demons and about the power of his seal, a gift from God.  

One of the Krâshens’ main sources of information was Rabghuzi’s book of the prophets found on the shelves of apostate homes.

in Ufa province. There, readers and listeners learned that Solomon had dominion over fairies, demons, and birds (but not over angels as the Prophet Muhammad did) until he lost his seal as a punishment for marrying a pagan woman who worshiped a statue of her dead father at home. The story itself could serve as a criticism of ancestral worship as practiced by Kräshens in their houses.153 Other books served as references. A Kräshen from Tri Sosny asked a Kräshen teacher, a former student of Il’minskii, whether it was true that the bee originated from Job’s body, a story found in Fäżā’il ash-Shühūr. The legend told that when Job was sick, two worms attempted to eat his heart and tongue, but Job called God and asked Him to stop the worms, otherwise he would be unable to pursue his zikr. God intervened immediately and transformed one of the worms into a bee (in Tatar, bal qorti, which literally means “worm of honey”).154

Missionaries learned to their distress that the Christian Tatars, even superficially Islamized, considered Jesus Christ to be merely one of the prophets and a lesser figure than Muhammad. When the police came to arrest him, a literate wealthy apostate who used to accompany his father to church services refused to give up Islam and declared to the police that ‘Isa (Jesus) lived in the fourth sphere of heaven. Heaven—as described in post-Qur’anic works, Rabghuzi’s tales of the prophets, and Baqîrhâni’s work—was divided into seven levels, which were sometimes assigned to particular prophets. According to a legend mentioned very early in Sufism, ‘Isa did not reach the highest sphere of paradise because after making the vow of poverty, he still carried a needle in his robe. That this successful apostate tailor mentioned the fourth heaven suggests that in his mind Jesus held a subordinate place in the rank of prophets—Muhammad had gone beyond the seven layers of heaven and faced God alone—and for this reason he could not abjure his faith. It also suggests that in this unequal power struggle, the tailor rather drew his knowledge from Bāqîrghān Kitâbî, where Jesus in the fourth heaven bowed to Muhammad, than from Rabghuzi’s tale of the Prophet’s ascension, where Jesus—although in the second heaven at an even lower level—happily greeted Muhammad for being such a good prophet. Although in Baqîrhâni’s work Jesus was truly subordinate and recognized Muhammad’s presence with deference, in Rabghuzi’s narrative Jesus, who even evaluated Muhammad’s performance as a prophet, greeted him as a new member of the prophets’ club. In the particular apostate context, which involved a more acute struggle between Islam and Christianity than in Transoxiana where Christianity did not hold power and Christians were to be convinced of Muhammad’s prophethood, Baqîrhâni offered a better mental tool of resistance.155

Stories about the prophets, as told by Muslim Tatars, were sometimes so well integrated into the popular consciousness that they could serve as an argument against the missionaries. Tatars and their animist and Christian proselytes often argued with Eastern Orthodox missionaries that the tale of Joseph as told in the Bible was

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incomplete: Zulaykha in “Tatar books” married Joseph, but not in “Russian books.” They pointed out that Jews and Christians added to the Islamic tradition. In Genesis Joseph boasted to his brothers that he had a dream in which they bound sheaves and theirs bowed in homage before his. However, the “Book of Joseph” mentioned only one dream—eleven stars turning around Joseph’s star.\(^{156}\) The Islamized converts also turned to the story of Joseph to attack the Orthodox practice of venerating icons which, according to Muslims, the Russians regarded as gods. As one Muslim woman explained to a Christian Tatar, when Joseph lived with the pharaoh, the latter’s wife fell in love with him and fervently prayed to her idols that he return her passion.\(^{157}\) When her prayers failed, she broke the idols in a fit of rage; in the same way Russians’ “wooden gods” would not respond to their worshipers’ pleas. By underscoring the impotence of these images, Tatar peasants advanced a sharp critique of the Russians’ icon veneration. More powerfully, by associating Russians with Zulaykha, and thus feminizing the encounter, they implied that Russians, like Zulaykha, would ultimately submit themselves to the one God and join Islam. Once Russians and Krâshens would turn away from their idols, as Zulaykha did, they, too, would merge with the divine. In this interpretation, both male and female believers could identify with Zulaykha, whose positive portrayal in these tales marked an important departure from early Sufi depictions of women as unclean.\(^{158}\)

For the most Islamized Krâshens, Muhammad was the true and Last Prophet, which indicated to them that his message was unchangeable. Before he ascended to the sky, said an apostate, a former parish elder, ‘Isa had promised to send another messenger of God to the pagan Arabs. According to some of the Krâshens, Muhammad was born a Greek; to others, a Tatar; and to the most Islamized, an Arab. A Krâshen woman from Bol’shie Savrushi even instructed other fellow villagers that ‘Isa was the son of Muhammad, and for that reason they should pay more respect to Muhammad than to ‘Isa.\(^{159}\) In any case, for all, Muhammad was the true prophet because his faith was “ancient.” In Sufi traditions, God created Muhammad’s Light from his own light, and from it He created Adam and Eve and the other prophets.\(^{160}\) Some apostates, more knowledgeable of Islamic history, could indicate the age of the Prophet at the time of his death and give the names of his parents. They knew about other members of Muhammad’s family. His son-in-law ‘Ali had a miraculous two-edged sword, which measured forty arshins (28.4 meters). It was the same sword that had delivered Kisekbash’s family from the Div.\(^{161}\)

Even Krâshens less advanced in the apostasy revered Muhammad as a prophet or saint. His miraculous deeds had attracted a large number of followers and the hand of God intervened in his life many times. Returning from Ufa province, the Krâshens of

\(^{156}\) Genesis, 37: 7; “Çin den kenägäsennän alγän bülek,” in Bálint, Kazáni-Tatár Nyelvtanulmányok, 71; Ilmînskii, ed., Kazanskaia tsentral’naia, 72.

\(^{157}\) In Tabari’s work, the woman who tempted Joseph was presented either as the pharaoh’s wife or the wife of the pharaoh’s prime minister. The History of al-Tabari, 154–155, 158.


\(^{160}\) Al-Rabghûzî, Stories, vol. 2: 522; Risâl-i nurnâmâ, 4.

Mamadysh district repeated the stories that they had heard there, such as the account of Muhammad’s ascension to heaven (mi’raj), a legend based on numerous hadith, which in the Islamic world has been the focus of Sufi piety since the eighth century. For Sufis, this episode—fully developed in Rabghuzi’s tales of the prophets and in Yalchïghol’s Risālä–yi ‘Azīzā—represented their own thirst for seeing and uniting with God. Very interestingly, Krâshens and their Tatar teachers added new details to the account in conformity with the Krâshens’ particular situation: a great stone had followed the Prophet into the sky and remained suspended in midair from that time on. For those weak in the faith, God had established four pillars under the rock. These four pillars did not touch the suspended stone, but did protect those who struggled in their faith, in particular the baptized Tatars. The stone (as described by the Krâshens) is not mentioned in Rabghuzi’s, Baqîrghani’s, or Yalchïghol’s works. However, in Muhammad al-Bukhari’s collection of hadith (d. 870), a stone relentlessly crushes the head of a man who rejected the Qur’an. Likewise, in Qara Dawud’s sixteenth-century Ottoman commentary of the Moroccan Sufi Abu ‘Abdullah Muhammad b. Sulayman al-Jazuli’s prayer book, known to the Tatars of Buinsk district, the Prophet during his ascent saw angels smash with stones the heads of a group of people who had given up the practice of daily prayer. The baptized could easily be identified with these Muslims who had abandoned the practice of their ancestral faith. The stone might also refer to Jacob’s stone (the shakra) in the al-Aqsa mosque, from whence arose a ladder to heaven—the same ladder that Muhammad borrowed to make his ascent to paradise. Another story, closer to the Krâshen tale, found in Qara Dawud’s mi’raj, claimed that when the prophet wished to raise his foot from the stone and climbed to mount the Buraq, the stone could not let the Prophet go, became one with the ladder, and followed its beloved to the sky. But, as in the story reported in Russian missionary sources, the Prophet commanded it to stay and since then the stone had remained suspended in midair. When applied to the Krâshen context, the story underscored that if the Krâshens obeyed the Prophet’s command as the stone did, the stone would not crush them for failing to apply the external aspects of the law. God, who was forgiving, and not Muhammad, who was only a man, protected them by placing pillars underneath the stone. The pillars might allude to the pillars of the al-Aqsa mosque that the Prophet had to describe for the skeptics who did not believe that he ascended to heaven. Interestingly, the Krâshens of Mamadysh district also believed that the Ka’ba, the sacred black stone in Mecca was suspended in mid-air. Thus, in this case, Turkic Sufi oral imagery—as embodied in the “flying stone” motif—had enriched the classical mi’raj narrative with new developments, akin to the baptized’s ambivalent situation.


Timofeev recorded other stories about Muhammad that also emphasized his compassion for those weak in the faith, and thus were relevant to the Christian Tatars. Moved by the plight of a poor man, Muhammad, in an act of great compassion, offered himself as the poor man’s slave to be sold to a wealthy person. After the poor man had completed this transaction and was returning home with his money, he suddenly saw Muhammad praying in a magnificent garden. Frightened, the poor man asked, “Who are you?” The Prophet replied with the words of the shahada: “Say of me, ‘there is no God but God and Muhammad is his Messenger.’”

Finally, God revealed himself through his “Friends,” the shaykhs. Kräshens of Tomasov-Pochinok in Mamadysh district, strongly influenced by Islam in the 1860s but later won over to Orthodoxy, used to visit the tomb of Idris Khalīfa, who brought Islam to their region in the seventeenth century and whose miraculous stories offered hopes of liberation for the baptized leaning toward Islam. Thus, one of the Kräshens’ favorite tales was the saint’s incarceration by the governor of Kazan who doubted that a simple Tatar could ever perform a miracle. “Yes, indeed,” confirmed the shaykh, “My miracles are not my own but come directly from God.” The saint invited the governor to go to Lake Kaban with him. There, Idris took his own ring, gave it to the Russian functionary and asked him to throw it into the water. To the amazement of all, the ring sprang up back again from the water, pushed by an incredible force, and ended up on the saint’s finger. Convinced, the governor freed the shaykh. Such a story reaffirmed the superiority of Islam in the eyes of the Kräshens (apostates and nonapostates), confirmed that Islam empowered simple men, but also reflected the apostates’ conviction that they, too, could be freed by the emperor who would, like the governor of Kazan, recognize the wonders of Islam.

Life after death was another important subject of discussion between Muslims and non-Muslims. Tatars affirmed to the nonbaptized Chuvash that if they converted, it would be easier for them to reach paradise than for the Russians, partly because their ancestral religion was closer to Islam than Christianity. Unlike Russians who did not purify themselves before going to church, nonbaptized Chuvash and starokreshchanye performed ablutions at the muncha before they proceeded with sacrifices to the gods and spirits of their ancestors. Although all Muslims would ultimately reach paradise, Tatars affirmed that Russians would burn eternally for the priest had chrismated them. Chrismation—or anointing with holy oil that has been consecrated by the presiding bishop of the church—is one of the sacraments of the Eastern Orthodoxy. It represents the reception of the Holy Spirit; during the sacrament, which is usually performed immediately after baptism, the priest anoints all five sense organs with the holy oil. Tatars argued that nonbaptized such as the “pagan” Chuvash would


164. Il’minskii, ed., Kazanskaia tsentral’naia, 68. This story appears in Nāṣīḥat as-Sāliḥīn (pp. 31–32) with two differences: the poor man was a student and Muhammad the immortal Prophet al-Khidr.

enter paradise more easily than their Christian brethren once they became Muslim because their body had not been anointed by the holy oil. The Kräshens’ position was more delicate. They run the same risk as Russians to have their skin—or at least those parts of the skin that had been chrismated—burn forever in hell even if they converted to Islam. A woman from Elyshevo who let her son study with Malov believed that to become Muslim, one needed to remove all the parts of the body that the priest had anointed. Tatars also told converts to Christianity that at baptism their protective angel had left them. For all these reasons, parents, committed to Islam, sought to hide new births from the priest as long as they could or pleaded the priest to inscribe their children’s name in the books but not baptize them. But when baptism was inevitable, as in Ianasal village, mothers washed up the anointed parts of the children’s body at the *muncha*, with lukewarm water and soap to ensure their passage to paradise. For boys, parents waited to circumcise them after baptism.\(^{166}\)

Even nonapostate Kräshens in Mamadysh district believed that when a man or a woman died, two angels came to the tomb and asked about his or her faith. Those two angels, Munkar and Nakir, were the divine agents of God’s righteous judgment. Inside the tomb, they showed the way to paradise for the righteous and the way to hell to the nonbelievers. Many Kräshens did not use coffins but buried their dead the Muslim way: wrapped in a shroud, the body was turned on its right side facing Mecca. The belief was that the deceased would answer the final questions sitting up as a sign of respect for the angels. When a Kräshen mother talked to Timofeev about her daughter’s funeral (she had been buried the Christian way), she could not help express her anxiety about seeing her daughter’s body in such a narrow coffin. Clearly, the apostate woman viewed the coffin as a violation of her daughter’s spiritual space and as an obstacle on her way out to the other world.\(^{167}\)

The Kräshens’ description of the afterlife did not differ from that of Biktashi’s. When challenged by missionaries, Kräshens proved their point by referring to what they called a true story. A Muslim woman in a neighboring village had gone to the cemetery to visit the tomb of a relative, recently buried, but when she approached the tomb, a horrible cry came out from the deceased and she heard the voices of his divine questioners. She fainted from fear and recovered only much later. The same type of story recurred in mystical books as a reminder of the ultimate Judgment Day.\(^{168}\)

Kräshens believed that the two angels appeared to the Muslims as well as to the Christians. Some who were more attached to their ancestors’ animist beliefs than to Christianity or Islam, retained the same basic story, but instead of the angels spirits armed with clubs and spears of fire asked the deceased about his/her good actions on earth. If one lay down at a distance of forty steps from the grave, it was possible to hear the spirits’ questions and the deceased’s answers.\(^{169}\) Like Muslim Tatars, nonapostate

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\(^{166}\) T. S., “Kakim obrazom Tatary uvelikaiut chuvash iazychnikov v mukhammedanstvo?” *IKE* no. 8 (15 April 1877): 230; Il’minskii, *Opyty perelozeniia*, 29; Otdel rukopisei Kazanskoi nauchnoi biblioteki im. Lobachevskogo, f. 7, ed. khr. 14, l. 33 ob.; and NART, f. 10, op. 1, d. 1655, l. 15; f. 93, op. 1, d. 619, l. 5 ob.; and f. 93, op. 1, d.128 v, l. 41.

\(^{167}\) NART, f. 4, op. 101, d. 11, l. 85 ob.; Aleksei Grigor’ev (priest), “Pogrebal’nye obriady inorodtsev Vostochnoi Rossii i Sibiri” (Kursovoe sochinenie, 1918), in NART, f. 10, op. 2, d. 1380, l. 5 ob.


Krăshens also believed that after death, the souls lived under earth, inside the horns of a gigantic bull upon which rested the earth. At Judgment Day, they said, the horns will break open and the souls will be released in order to be judged. In the 1880s, those beliefs, popularized in Risālá-yi ‘Azīzā and other books, would be condemned by modernists as “unscientific.”

Tatars, concerned about the Krăshens’ salvation, ceaselessly repeated to them that they could attain paradise if they recited the shahada, especially before they die. The baptized tailors of Staraia Ikshurma, Mamadysh district, affirmed to the inhabitants of Kreshchonskie Biliatli that Muslim Tatar prayers guaranteed paradise, unlike Russian prayers. And the starokreshchenye of Mamadysh district, still attached to their indigenous beliefs, knew the consequences of not following the five pillars of Islam. According to them, Muslims who went on the Meccan pilgrimage had to descend into a long and narrow cavern. Only those who believed in God and followed all Qur’anic prescriptions to the letter would gracefully traverse the cavern. The cavern for the elect would get bigger and brighter while it would become narrower and darker for those who had sinned and failed to follow all Qur’anic prescriptions. The test of the cavern in some regard constituted a pretest for the ultimate test of the Sirat bridge, which awaited all believers and nonbelievers after death. Perplexed, Krăshens wondered whether Christians could go to Mecca and pass the test.

To answer this question, Krăshens leaning toward Islam believed that God would pardon the sins of converts to Islam. According to priest Miropol’skii, Tatars told starokreshchenye that if they returned to the faith of their ancestors, they would be as innocent as newborns. Baptized apostates also believed that if soldiers put them to death, they would automatically enter paradise as shahids: “If Russians fire on us, we will die promptly, and upon us, there will be no sin.” Indeed, in Nāṣīḥāt aṣ-Ṣālihin, those who died in the hands of kafirs had all their sins forgiven, included missed prayers. Apostates also believed that the sins of people whom God had caused to perish suddenly would be forgiven: women who died in childbirth, those struck by lightning, or people who had drowned. According to Yalchïghol women who died in childbirth would not have their past deed weighed on the scale and would enter paradise without being questioned by the angels. While arguing with a Christian missionary, a Krăshen tailor observed that Tatars could absolve themselves of sin in the same way that the Russians did, through confession. According to this tailor, someone who wished to free himself of his sin could offer a horse or a cow to another, who, in return, would bear the punishment for his sin in the next world. Despite the bizarre nature of this transaction, which apparently violated the Qur’an (31:33), the exchange was closely linked to the idea that God was merciful, a theme constantly repeated in

170. Mashanov, “Zametka,” IKE no. 1 (1 January 1875): 25–26; Yâlchïghol, Risālā, 7–8 (in Islamic mythology, the world lay on a bull who stood on the whiskers of a mythical fish); Fâkhr ad-Dīn was a critic of this mythology, ḋawāmi’, 260–273 (hadith no. 166).
173. NART, f. 1, op. 3, d. 3048, ll. 31–31 ob.; Nāṣīḥāt aṣ-Ṣālihin, 19.
the sermons of the Muslim missionaries. The exchange could also refer to the Tatars’ custom, called *fidyä*, which allowed relatives and members of the community to “pay back” the deceased’s missed prayers and fasts. The payment could be done either in kind or in money.\(^{175}\)

Although apostates revered ascetic *ishans*, they also believed that asceticism was not the automatic key to paradise. Feodor (Aptrakhimov), whose father had been exiled to Siberia, told a missionary the story of an *ishan* who spent years in a cavern to please God, but God promised him paradise only after he came out of the cavern and said *Bismillah* before removing an obstacle from the road he trod upon. This story perfectly mirrored Baqïrghani’s, Yalchïghol’s, and Biktashi’s teachings about the Islamic obligation of uttering “In the name of God” before starting any action, the necessity for the friends of God to live in this world, and the possibility of earning salvation through worldly prosaic acts, useful to society. At the same time, when placed in the context of the apostate and missionary encounter, the story takes an even more interesting turn. Whereas the missionary sought to revert Feodor to Christianity by denouncing Islam as a sensuous, worldly religion and Christianity as more spiritual and celestial, the apostate identified Christianity with strict asceticism that Naqshbandi Sufis condemned and Islam with the world, understood as a space where God’s will could operate through human agency. Feodor’s conclusion obviously was that Islam was superior to Christianity because it acted for the good of the community.\(^{176}\)

Finally, at the Last Judgment, the message of Muhammad would be reaffirmed. According to one Tatar informant, at the Last Judgment, each Muslim could throw two infidels into hell, but a Muslim’s intercession could also save an unbeliever. Like other eschatological stories favored by the Krâshens, this one underlined the possibility of redemption and God’s mercy. This also underscored that any Muslim, like the Prophet Muhammad, could be an intercessor for others. Tatar eschatology encouraged all Krâshens to abandon Christianity by declaring the future unconditional global victory of Islam. Only when all Muslims would unite—including the Krâshens—would the Mahdi appear. “Before the end of the world,” said one “baptized” *abïstay*, “the whole world will become Muslim.” The Krâshens of Elyshevo village knew of the Mahdist tradition that ‘Isa would return to earth and live a happy life for forty years before the end of the world. A baptized tailor thus concluded that Muhammad and ‘Isa must be equal since believers would pray to both to be saved from hell at the Last Judgment.\(^{177}\)

The missionaries’ main argument was that Krâshens “returned” to Islam without knowing anything about either Islam or Christianity. They advocated that the language of Christian proselytism among Krâshens should be vernacular Tatar, purged of Arabic and Farsi loan words, which they believed Krâshens did not understand. Later Tatar reformists argued that traditional religious textbooks failed to instill faith in


children. From both sides, Russian missionaries and reformist Muslims, the position was that literary language with its Arabic and Persian loan words and archaisms was alien to Tatar or Kräshen peasants. Both missionaries and modernist Tatars made a strong distinction between folk oral Tatar traditions and elitist bookish literature, but evidence shows that the munajat and other story telling devices served as a bridge between literates and illiterates.

Sufi books allowed different readings that applied to different levels of interiorization of the Muslim faith and different communal contexts. A number of hadith and early theologians introduced the idea that believers sent to hell would ultimately be saved. As in the Middle East, authors of Tatar religious prose and poems often de-emphasized individual responsibility and stressed intercession by Muhammad or other nonprophetic mediators such as men of learning, the community as a whole, or talismans containing the Word of God. Missionaries for Islam used both ideas—personal responsibility for one’s fate and forgiveness—to gain converts. Kräshens were told that they were not liable for their ancestors’ sins. At the same time, Sufi authors’ visions of the Last Judgment promised the apostate Kräshens that, as Muslims, they would have a powerful patron before God in the person of Muhammad. Kräshens also learned that by paying the sadaqa and praying for the dead, their kins’ fate could be alleviated in the afterlife. They also learned that even if they remained faithful to their so-called pagan beliefs but honored Islamic customs, they could gain a seat in the Muslim paradise. If shunned by their immediate Tatar neighbors, apostates could identify themselves with Joseph, who despite his own brothers’ rejection became a charismatic prophet and ruler. The same books made the Tatar Muslims sensitive to the idea that the community, as a whole, was responsible for those who have sinned, and should act on it by praying for their salvation and spreading the knowledge of God. As outlined in Risālä-yi ‘Azīzā, Allah would grant missionaries of Islam with the gifts and rewards due to the prophets. Finally, not only did the fulfillment of Islamic rituals bring salvation in the afterlife, but it also had medicinal properties in this world. Kräshens and other Finno-Ugric peoples held Tatar mullahs in great esteem for their healing powers.

Although Sufi books emphasized forgiveness and Muhammad’s intercession, they also advocated a stricter observance of rituals and social responsibilities. Hell awaited those who did not observe their prayers or act in a Muslim way. By allowing different readings—one stricter, the other more lenient—popular religious literature took different levels of Islamization into consideration, and left room for continuous self-improvement. If one compares popular discourse and the content of Sufi books regarding rituals, it appears that at times proselytizers of Islam showed an even greater flexibility toward rituals, allowing Kräshens and Maris to pray exclusively in Tatar or repeat just the name of God because they were illiterate. This did not go against the teaching contained in the Sufi books, but once the believer had access to some form of literacy, the path to God implied personal and communal reform through study, under the guidance of a relative, a shaykh, or a learned scholar.

In the case of a baptized community, evidence shows that access to a spiritual guide was not always readily available. Those who desired to partake in the civilization of Islam had to go after the knowledge they aspired to grasp. Eager to understand the Qur’anic truth, they even asked Russian missionaries who could read the
Qur’an to translate it for them. When in one case the missionary refused to comply, the apostate simply turned to his tafsir, which provided an approximate translation or commentary in Turkic. Besides the manuscript production and reproduction of Muslim texts by madrasa students, their printing by the University of Kazan provided self-help tools, which greatly facilitated further reproduction of Islamic knowledge in the baptized milieu. As a result, apostates were quite articulate; they could explain, compare, and argue different practices and rituals at their meeting with Russian missionaries, using earlier encounters between Islam, Christianity, and shamanism in Turkic-language literature as their scripts.

More than political and economic factors, epics, tales of the prophets, poems, and sacred places as lieux de mémoire deeply affected the individual and collective consciousness of Muslims and would-be Muslims. They shaped the actions of their listeners and carriers, who, besides prominent charismatic shaykhs, included anonymous men and women who read, chanted, and interpreted their content in their homes and beyond. These stories constituted a considerable source of discursive power, which cemented disparate communities together through elaborate economic, educational, and kinship networks. How these networks were strongly interconnected is the subject of the next chapter.