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SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

The Talking Dead: Everyday Muslim Practice in Russia

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Abstract

This article focusses on the issue of "traditional Islam" in Russia and the practices associated with it. Employing an approach that combines the concepts of lived religion and everyday nationalism, those practices are taken into consideration that are often interpreted in terms of vernacular Islam and regarded skeptically, if not outright rejected, by proponents of a more global Islam. Discussed in detail are commemoration ceremonies for the dead, prayers in the cemetery, saint veneration and local pilgrimage, the *mawlid* celebration and the use of prayer beads. These practices indicate an outlook on life, where Muslim believers cultivate a close connection to their environment and maintain personal relations to various human and more-than-human beings, thus creating the space for an exchange crossing the boundary between life and death. The article contributes to the anthropological study of Islam in Russia and—by focusing on religious practice—specifically attempts to capture the main characteristics of "traditional Islam."

Keywords: practice; lived religion; funeral culture; saint veneration; Islam; Russia

Introduction

It was on a hot midsummer afternoon in 2015 that I found myself attending a Muslim commemoration ceremony in the Siberian city of Tyumen. Wearing a *tubeteika*, the traditional Tatar headgear, I tried my best to blend into the group of guests who had come together to pay their respects to the deceased husband of my Tatar friends' grandmother. After the imam's sermon and a collective prayer, we began to circulate coins and banknotes as a charitable gesture (*sadaqa*). Only then was it possible to lift the white tablecloth covering the sumptuous and plentiful dishes and commence with the banquet.

The commemoration ceremony outlined here counts as one of those religious practices that in the Russian Federation of the present moment are being associated with so-called traditional Islam, an interpretation of the faith of the state's Muslim minority that has acquired official status over the previous years. Often, the advocates of "traditional Islam" stress its close connections with Muslim minority ethnic culture or sentiments of belonging to the Russian nation-state. Other groups and individuals argue that Islam must not be fused with culture and the two are to be held separate. From this discussion, we see both contrasting but also compatible positions toward Islam emerging, where the religion is approximated from points of view here referred to as local, regional, national, or global. In the following pages, I wish to inquire about what religious practices conceived in Russia as forming part of "traditional Islam" have in common that qualifies them to be included in a category of religious conventions approved by some Muslims and rejected by others. For this purpose, I will look at vernacular Muslim practices which are held to form part of "traditional Islam," compare them with one another, and then see if a common pattern can be detected. The outcome of this exercise suggests the following: the religious practices assembled here point toward

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a perception of the cosmos and our place within it, where Muslim believers are embedded in their physical environment and form a community with other human and non-human beings. In a setting of continuous exchange, living people engage in conversation with deceased relatives but also ancestors and turn to Muslim saints that have passed away centuries ago. This seems to be true for those interpretations of Islam that relate to a more or less clearly delimited space (local, regional, national) but less so for the global variant, which appears to have been abstracted from a religious life integrated in the natural and social environment. With the intention of gaining a balanced picture, vernacular belief and practice are contemplated from angles that are in disagreement. To be able to regard practices with the attention they deserve, an approach is being employed that combines the concepts of lived religion and everyday nationalism. These concepts share a preoccupation with concrete formations of identification in everyday life and have in the more recent past become increasingly influential in the social sciences. The notion of everyday nationalism contains the advantage that identity is being analytically related to specific territories in space.

Although the article begins with a memory fragment of fieldwork in Siberia, all the other empirical material in the text was collected in the Russian Urals over a period of more than three years. The Urals are one of those areas in Russia showing a rich diversity in ethnic and religious culture, including Muslim culture. When collecting research data, the author made use of participant observation and informal interviews in order to contribute to an anthropological discussion of Islam in Russia. This discussion must be recognized as important, since much of the existing research on Islam in Russia is confined to the disciplines of history and politics but does not necessarily engage with the matter as incorporated in everyday routines in contemporary society.

The first section of this article further specifies the phenomenon of "traditional Islam." By no means is it my intention to simplify the lived reality of Islam in this part of the world, but it seems necessary to first establish a more general picture before attending to the nuances and contradictions. After that, the two concepts informing the theoretical approach to the practices in question are introduced: lived religion and everyday nationalism. Next, five standard practices associated with "traditional Islam" will be described and compared. The final section before the conclusion is meant to depict a more global reading of these practices, but it also attends to the cosmological view indicated by them.

The Trouble with "Traditional Islam"

When doing research in Muslim communities in Russia, one regularly finds oneself in situations, where there is disagreement about the details of belief and correct religious practice. In the winter of 2015, I sat together with a group of young Muslims in the basement of the Friday Mosque in a mostly ethnic Tatar/Bashkir rural locality in the south of Perm Krai after the last prayer of the day. The previous day, I had been on my first local Muslim pilgrimage to several cemeteries and the mausoleum of a venerated holy man in the company of another group of Muslims. As I recount the events of the tour to these places, my conversation partners who have all studied in Egypt and wear long beards, remain politely silent. Asking for their opinion, one of them tells me that the regulations only proclaim the necessity to visit three sacred places—Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem—and that the religious tradition is being interpreted in a number of different ways. Without any bad intention, I suddenly realized I was in the middle of a conflict between those who perform traditional religious customs and a more reformist-minded fraction that disapproves of the same practices.[1]

This anecdote constitutes an almost stereotypical example of how practices that are associated with "traditional Islam" can be accepted or rejected depending upon the person or people one speaks to.

Without question, "traditional Islam" is one of the most passionately discussed issues in Russia's Muslim communities and beyond those in academic circles and among experts concerned with security or political ideology. Taking it up in this article constitutes a challenge, as different factions

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and individuals interpret "traditional Islam" in a sometimes rather distinct manner. The first interpretation may be regarded as national, as "traditional Islam" is here understood as the kind of Islam that would be appropriate for the Russian Federation (Goble 2014). In the majority of cases, representatives of the state will take such a national perspective that differentiates Muslim traditions in Russia from those that people in other parts of the world adhere to and the import of which is represented as potentially dangerous for the harmonious co-existence of ethnic and religious diversity in the country.[2] Next, one can read "traditional Islam" in an ethnic sense, then supplying it with the meaning of an Islam that is, for instance, Tatar, Bashkir, or Chechen in character. Such a perspective might be adopted by those with a strong sense of ethnic belonging, as nationalist-minded members of the ethnic minorities. Another way to make sense of "traditional Islam" would be an interpretation that is more local, regional, or cultural than ethnic, although it becomes apparent at this point how fuzzy these distinctions truly are. This perspective stresses practices that are tied to local or regional places, personages, and phenomena, examples being local pilgrimage rites or Sufi techniques of contemplation. Finally, some people think of "traditional Islam" as orthodox and true to the regulations, which can mean an accordance with the Hanafi tradition in Sunni Islam (Di Puppo 2019, 11–14). Di Puppo shows how Tatar religious authorities often interpret Hanafism in terms of local heritage and a particular spiritual environment. It must also be mentioned that the same people usually do not associate Hanafism with a legal tradition but with the doctrinal teachings of the *kalam* school developed by Maturidi.[3] This point of view may be considered mostly theological and a response to the accusation that "traditional Islam" is no proper Islam (Benussi 2018).

Approaching "traditional Islam" in this article from an anthropological angle, it is on the level of everyday culture that concrete practices are being observed. This does not mean, however, that these practices would not be considered by both groups and individuals on more abstract levels of interpretation and contribute to discourses about ethnicity and nationality. It should become apparent in these pages that practices associated with "traditional Islam" are commonly rejected by proponents of a mainly global interpretation of the religion. Several other scholars working on Islam in Eastern Europe and Eurasia recognize this difference and conflict. When characterizing the religious position of the Tatar writer and activist Fawziya Bayramova, the historian Agnes Kefeli (2014, 607) asserts that, although Bayramova is difficult to place in any one category, she displays some similarities with "Wahhabi" sympathizers in that she encourages her fellow Tatar Muslims to give up communal bonds for transnational religious connections. Or, in their illustration of the conditions in the post-socialist Balkans, Elbasani and Tošić (2017, 4–5) mention the arrival of global Islamic movements, some of them intending to rid Muslim practices they encounter in their new environment from what they consider to be local mutations. Yet, before fully entering the discussion, it will be necessary to characterize the theoretical approach adopted here.

Lived Religion and Everyday Nationalism

When having to choose among the two concepts introduced in this section to make sense of Islam in Russia, lived religion appears at first sight as the more reasonable option. It has been discussed and further developed by a number of researchers from religious studies and history (Orsi 2002; McGuire 2008; Coleman 2014), although similar ideas have been processed in other disciplines more or less simultaneously, as will be illustrated below. In his famous book about the veneration of the Madonna in the Italian-American community of New York, Robert Orsi defines lived religion as "religious practices and imagination in ongoing, dynamic relation with the realities and structures of everyday life in particular times and places" (Orsi 2002, xxxi). The author argues that the study of theology, dogma, and prescribed behavior ought to be complemented with the close examination of religion in its concrete and practical dimensions (Orsi 2002, xxxvii–xxxix). By focusing on practice, though, we are not supposed to neglect ideas and other capacities of the mind. Instead, one should aim for an approach that takes into consideration "institutions *and* persons, texts *and* rituals,

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practice *and* theology, things *and* ideas" (Orsi 2002, xxxvii). Following the path delineated by Orsi means observing religious practice as it relates to the wider context, to which culture and history contribute as well. Most relevant for the discussion at hand would be the author's assertion that from the perspective of lived religion the more abstract aspects of religious life are in the end only means of engaging with the world (Orsi 2002, xxxix). I consider this last point an important insight that has certainly been overlooked until more recently by the social sciences in their study of Islam.

Much of the above has been reflected in corresponding terms in the anthropology of Islam. This would also be the case for the discrepancy between Islam interpreted in a concrete or an abstract manner. Starting in the mid-1980s, we have seen the formation of two competing approaches to Islam in the discipline of anthropology: the piety approach following Talal Asad and the everyday Islam approach that must be considered a reaction to the piety tradition. Asad (1986) thinks of Islam as a discursive tradition and the scholars walking in his footsteps (Mahmood 2012; Hirschkind 2006) have usually stressed religious doctrine, textual norm, and piety in the sense of complying with rules and regulations. In contrast to the piety approach, which can be and has been accused of privileging scripturalist interpretations of the faith, the everyday Islam approach is less concerned with religious perfection and more with everyday expressions of religious sentiment (Schielke 2009; Marsden 2005). Different from the concept of lived religion, the promotion of everyday Islam does not necessarily aim for a reconciliation of conflicting tendencies, possibly to counter the significant influence of the piety approach in academia.

The combination of the concepts of lived religion and everyday nationalism may seem unusual, but I nonetheless regard it as appropriate for the following reasons: (1) identity has historically been differently constituted in the Russian Empire than in most of Western Europe and the notion of "traditional Islam" mirrors a situation, which to people unfamiliar with it must appear as a blurring of otherwise more clearly distinguishable identities; (2) the concept of everyday nationalism establishes a link to a more or less distinctly delineated space.[4] As stated above, it can be a difficult task to keep apart categories of identification and one sometimes gains the impression that scholars are tempted to transfer the conditions they are used to from their respective cultural backgrounds to other places. This is particularly problematic in the case of Russia, where it is possible to observe an interlacing and merging of religious and national identities. Even before we can historically speak of statehood, Russian identity and Orthodox faith typically went hand in hand (Suny 2001, 35). And until the spread of more modern conceptualizations of collective belonging in the Russian empire of the 19th century, to be called or calling oneself a Muslim was almost equally an ethnic as well as a religious designation. "Traditional Islam" itself can be understood in multiple ways and religious identity may on occasion assume more ethnic and regional connotations.[5] One example would be the tendency of ethnic Tatars and Bashkirs to claim well-respected Sufi sheikhs such as Zaynulla Rasulev or Gabidulla Kurbangaliev for themselves and declare them to be ethnically Tatar or Bashkir respectively. A similar procedure takes place regarding those companions of the Prophet Muhammad whose graves are found in the Volga and Ural regions. Even though the companions (*sahabah*) are not referred to as fellow Tatars or Bashkirs, the gravesites—depending upon their location—elevate the religious status of the respective ethnic groups. The ethnic minority languages can also be perceived as intimately connected to religious practice, whereas reform-oriented Muslims will often only encourage the study of Arabic and see no reason in preserving their native languages. If, though, one were to equate Muslim identification with adherence to the Hanafi tradition within Islam, then we might be speaking about a regional or even transregional religious identity, as Hanafism predominates all across Central Eurasia and thus well beyond the borders of Russia.

Secondly, by using the concept of everyday nationalism, we maintain a connection to a space confined in one way or the other. Before taking up this point, it will be best to further introduce the concept. Over the previous two decades, several works had a formative impact upon how we are able to think about nationalism in the everyday lives of people who do not belong to the political elite and are not directly involved in nation-building on an ideological level (Brubaker, Feischmidt, Fox, and

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Grancea 2006; Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008; Goode and Stroup 2015). In their book "Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town," Brubaker et al. (2006) show how the Romanian- and Bulgarian-speaking residents of Cluj negotiate their national and ethnic belonging from situation to situation. Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008) continue in this vein and, instead of placing national groups at the center of their attention, focus on everyday practices that produce and reproduce nationhood. Similarly, Goode and Stroup (2015, 8) argue that everyday ethnicity and nationality bear the potential of disaggregating groups by shifting our interest to quotidian practices.[6] To take up this endeavor, one would need to replace groups and individuals with ethnic or nationalist practices as units of analysis. Slightly shifting focus in his book about banal nationalism, Michael Billig (1995) continues stressing the routines of social life, which in his account become a setting for appeals by the state to a shared national identity. In reference to Billig, Tim Edensor (2006, 536–537) indicates that national habits and routines are bound to mundane spatial contexts and organized around serial sites. The more abstract image of the nation can only develop from our first-hand perception of the immediate environment, a sense of place cultivated by each person (Edensor 2006, 538). Everyday nationalism seems well suited to complement the discussion of Islam in Russia, as it relates identity more plainly to space than lived religion does. In these pages, I treat everyday nationalism as a comprehensive term that contains other less encompassing forms of identification. Edensor (2006, 541) writes that despite globalization, it is through routines, habits, and schedules on the domestic, local, and national levels that identities are formed.

The approach outlined here allows me to take a closer look at practice to recognize the concrete forms that Islam can assume under certain conditions. It is by consciously adopting this kind of micro-perspective that one begins to make sense of these practices, their constitution and interconnections in their own right. We become aware of how Muslim identities relate to other, not primarily religious identifications on the local, regional, national, and global level. But would that be all we can hope for? Goode and Stroup (2015, 8) suggest that illustrating a variety of practices should not be the outcome of one's efforts but the beginning of analysis. We will therefore attempt to see the existential order—demarcated by the practices in question—in which our lives and afterlives unfold.

Practices of "Traditional Islam"

The concrete Muslim practices that I will consider in more detail below are also those that are most commonly interpreted to be representative of "traditional Islam" in Russia: (1) commemoration ceremonies for the dead, (2) prayers in the cemetery, (3) saint veneration and local pilgrimage, plus (4) the *mawlid* celebration. I added one further custom, informed by the same idea as the other practices, even though people do not refer to it all that often: (5) the use of *tasbih* (prayer beads). Typically, these practices have so strongly blended with everyday forms of religious life and culture that they are rarely critically reflected; a circumstance that indicates the benefits of employing an approach attending to identities in their quotidian dimensions.

Commemoration Ceremonies

After the passing away of a loved one, Muslims of ethnic minority background whose outlook is not too secular and who respect the religious traditions of their ancestors may hold a commemoration ceremony for the deceased. These usually take place three, seven, and 40 days from the day of the relative's death and are then repeated on an annual basis, although primary religious sources that would assign any particular day for this purpose do not exist.[7] From a religious point of view, the commemoration ceremonies cannot even be considered a necessity. In a conversation with a very devout Sufi Muslim, he declares that these kinds of meetings are permitted and even beneficial when they become an opportunity to read from the Quran.[8] He further qualifies the statement by

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explaining that Muslims must not hold these ceremonies in the belief that they constitute a religious obligation, as they are then acting contrary to *sharia* regulations. Another Sufi Muslim, in contrast, regards the commemoration of one's relatives as very important.[9]

The organizers of this ritual gathering are supposed to ascertain that it serves a charitable cause on behalf of the deceased, such as arranging a feast or distributing alms to the poor. And those who attend the event are expected to remember the person who passed away. The latter requirement is also connected to the idea that the prayer for the deceased will improve their situation in the afterlife.[10] Even from a solely religious perspective that does not consider ethnic culture, both the communal prayer (*dua*) and the distribution of alms (*sadaqa*) practiced on these occasions have to be evaluated in a positive light. Speculations about an influence of Orthodox Christianity on the form that Muslim commemoration ceremonies take in Russia are not uncommon.[11]

Prayers in the Cemetery

In late July 2016, I spent about ten days in an administrative district with a sizable Tatar minority in the south of Perm Krai. One morning, the *imam mukhtasib*, the highest-ranking imam of the district, picked me up with his car to drive to a village, where a member of his congregation had just passed away the previous night. After making sure that the dead body is prepared in line with instructions and that a few villagers have started to dig a grave in the cemetery, the dead man is carried there on a stretcher. Wrapped in a white cloth, the body is lowered into the grave, and, in order to protect it, a crate is built with wooden boards before the soil is once again shoveled into the opening. Four bricks are laid at each corner of the grave and the men place a metal cage on top of these. In the end, hand towels are wrapped to all four corners of the cage, the assembled pray together and the towels are taken home by those who assisted in the ceremony.

This is just one example for the circumstances in which a prayer in the cemetery may take place. Advice for how best to behave in a cemetery can also be found on the Internet. The news site Islam Today, whose editorial office is located in Kazan, for instance, informs readers in an article about the correct conduct (*adab*) when visiting a cemetery.[12] To argue for the legitimacy of this custom, the author first turns to the prophetic tradition, more precisely "The Book of Prayers" by Sahih Muslim. One *hadith* is directly concerned with an issue from the previous subsection: supplication by the living for the fate of the dead. According to Muslim, the Prophet Muhammad was in conversation with his wife Aisha, telling her that the angel Gabriel had delivered God's command to go to Baqi' cemetery to beg forgiveness for the people lying there. In another *hadith*, the Prophet Muhammad stands at the grave of his mother and tells those around him that God had given his permission to visit the grave. He then encourages the crowd to visit the graves of the dead, since it reminds people that death is inevitable and everything comes to an end.[13] The author then moves on to discuss the right conduct in the cemetery. Even though it is best to enter the cemetery in a state of ritual purity, no specific time is reserved for visiting the place. One can then ask for the well-being of the living and the dead and read verses from the Quran, as—the author explains—grace descends upon any place where the Quran is read. Apart from that, one may think about the fleeting nature of life to learn a lesson in morality and plant a tree or shrub on the grave of the dead.

Saint Veneration and Local Pilgrimage

In regard to the issue of saint veneration, I would like to recount a conversation I had in July 2018 with a *murid* (disciple) from the Naqshbandi-Mujaddidi brotherhood in Bashkortostan, as it turned out to be quite central for my understanding of the radical difference between local and global interpretations of Muslim practice. I was sitting in the kitchen of my flat, drinking tea and eating bread and olives with two Sufi brothers who had just instructed me in a mystical technique of their order, a few sequences of which consisted of prayers to the Sufi *sheikhs* (saints). How am I to interpret this prayer to the *sheikhs*, I wanted to know. The older of the two Sufi Muslims explained

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that we have to choose intermediaries as we are much too polluted to directly address God with our prayers.[14] This is why God sent his envoys to earth, he adds. To better explain the situation, he uses a metaphor: I am supposed to imagine that I borrow my uncle's car and then crash it, causing family relations to deteriorate, and at some point later I realize that I have to borrow money for a wedding or a similar endeavor. Now, it seems better that I do not speak to my uncle directly but instead ask my father if he may not intervene on my behalf. In the same way, Sufi Muslims, hoping to eventually prove to be worthy of God's favor, seek the proximity and help of the friends of God. Apart from that, my conversation partner points out, we have to understand that the masters (*pirs*) are not dead but very much alive. Everything is different from what we perceive it to be. Instead, it is us who are dead, as the eye that looks into the spiritual world is closed and only the eye looking into the material world is open.[15] When moving the conversation in the direction about the differences between interpretations of Islam that one might consider to be Sufi and Salafi respectively, my interlocutor is saddened that from the latter point of view any teachers of humanity in human shape must be rejected. Even though the Salafis argue that they return to the origins, he thinks that they commit the same mistake that *shaitan* made a long time in the past. *Shaitan* used to be a powerful *jinn*, standing in the hierarchy above all angels, but he was also the only one who refused to bow to God's creation Adam, this being the reason for *shaitan* to fall out of the skies and be banished to hell. In the history of humanity, the Sufi Muslim continues the line of reasoning, this mistake was repeated multiple times. For the teachers of humanity we use a range of different names—prophet, *khalifa*, *pir*, and others—but all of them actually play the same role and want to instruct us in how to live our lives.[16] The grave mistake of the majority of people, including most Muslims, lies in the fact that they do not take these instructors in human shape seriously.

The veneration of saints in Islam is without question too comprehensive and complex a topic to cover in the limited space of a few pages. In an article about the granting of benefits in Islam that considers the daily practices of Muslims, anthropologist Kazuo Ohtsuka (1988, 147–148) characterizes the idea of exchange as one of the central aspects of saint veneration. Almost anywhere in the Muslim world, pilgrims visit the tomb or shrine of a saint, a practice called *ziyarat*, to address the saint in prayer and then receive a blessing that may relieve them of an illness or enable them to succeed in a business transaction or another kind of project. Whereas some people believe that the saint himself can grant a wish, from the Russian context I am only familiar with the saint in an intermediary role, as described by my conversation partner in the previous paragraph. The formal term for this phenomenon would be intercession and will be further discussed below. Curiously, Ohtsuka (1988, 149), when reproducing a dialogue with an imam in Egypt, uses very similar words to describe the phenomenon. According to this imam, the saint, whose soul is purer than those of most people and who is therefore closer to God, begs God to grant the wishes of those seeking his help and assistance. One of my interlocutors establishes a connection to the other two practices of commemoration ceremonies and praying in the cemetery when saying that, different from our relatives who after their demise wait for our prayers, the saints do not really need anything from us.[17] Instead, it is us who receive *baraka* (spiritual energy) from them. He likewise explains that the saints are free of any sins and not really dead, even though their bodies are of no use anymore.

In the Russian Urals, the sacred places where the graves of holy men can be found and that become the destination of pilgrimage are often located on hills overlooking the surrounding area. Next to the grave, the visitor can usually discover trees or bushes to which pilgrims have attached colorful ribbons. Sometimes, a spring is situated not far from the grave and pilgrims like to collect the spring water that is supposed to contain the *baraka* of the saint and have healing qualities.

The Mawlid Celebration

Since starting my research of Islam in the Urals, I only once so far had the opportunity to take part in a *mawlid* celebration. On this day, Muslims celebrate the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad and in Russia a festive event on *mawlid* constitutes a safe indicator of a mosque and its personnel to

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follow "traditional Islam." When attending a *mawlid* ceremony at Ikhlas Mosque in central Ufa in late December 2016, I had the impression that the program provided insight into some of the facets of what is considered "traditional Islam" in Russia these days. Young people sang songs of religious character and members of ethnic minorities sang in their native tongues. Some older men encouraged the people in the audience to exchange Western clothing for the traditional attire of their Tatar and Bashkir ancestors. Relations to other parts of the Muslim world were likewise emphasized and guests from Dagestan and Egypt were invited to speak to the congregation. At the end of the event, a book by a Dagestani *sheikh* was being distributed to anyone who attended the celebration. Another speaker delivered more of a political message when he pointed to the significance of protecting traditional values in Russia.

Use of Tasbih

Muslims in Russia refer to the prayer beads used during the service at the mosque, but also in private, as *tasbih.* After the prayer, Muslims are supposed to recite phrases praising God, known as the *tasbih*, the *tahmid*, and the *takbir.*[18] For this purpose one uses either the fingers or prayer beads to repeat the *tasbih* and *tahmid* 33 times and the *takbir* 34 times. In my own experience, Sufis think of the prayer beads as especially important, whereas I once encountered more reform-oriented Muslims when traveling from Russia to Kazakhstan who advised me to forget about them.

Of all the practices described here, the use of *tasbih* is clearly the least spatially confined, if we do not think of the variation in appearance of the prayer beads. The relatives and ancestors people remember and pray for in commemoration ceremonies and at the graves of the deceased are either locals or have lived a substantial amount of time in the area. The same is true for the saints who are being venerated at sacred sites. *Mawlid* is celebrated all over the world, but the festivities still look different from place to place. As suggested here, the respect and even reverence for *tasbih* is not limited to Russia alone. In an article about an Iranian Sufi master who makes *tasbih* himself from wood, clay, and olive pits, the anthropologist Younes Saramifar (2018, 46–50) mentions how prayer beads are expected to be handled with caution: they must neither be thrown aside after using them or simply wrapped around one's wrist. According to the Sufi master, they have their own agency and will call on God even without the involvement of the person carrying the *tasbih.* The prayer beads are also characterized as being alive and having a soul.

Arriving at this point, we might ask ourselves what it is that the above practices have in common. When looking more closely, a picture emerges where practitioners of Islam are in close contact to the land around them and they interact before this background with other human and non-human beings. More generally, these beings are human and have passed away, as in the case of the relatives that must be remembered and for the sake of whom one pleads with God or in the case of the Prophet Muhammad in whose honor one celebrates *mawlid.* As we have seen above, it is not quite clear if the Sufi saints have to be regarded as dead or alive, but pilgrims nonetheless ask them to intercede on their behalf. The interaction with the *tasbih* demonstrates that these beings must not be human under all circumstances.

By relating to the natural environment—hills, forests, lakes, caves, the ground below and the sky above—and the built forms within that environment—shrines, mosques, mausoleums, cemeteries, ruins—we are able to establish a connection to those other beings. Writing specifically about Tatar Muslim sacred sites, Urazamanova et al. (2014, 33) characterize them as places that confirm the boundary between the familiar and the strange, us and them, the living and the dead. I agree that this boundary comes to our attention in such places, but not, I would argue, because it is being confirmed but because it dissolves before our eyes and we recognize ourselves as belonging to a community that includes those who walk this earth and the ones dwelling in the hereafter. Zavgarova (2018), who likewise treats saint veneration and ancestor worship among Tatars as aspects of the same phenomenon, mentions a condition where the dead care for and protect the living. Her article is accompanied by pictures that suggest an intimate relationship between man

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and nature and one drawing shows a line of trees with anthropomorphic features, parting before a sparrow in flight. Here, one is reminded of the prayer beads that have a conscience and wish to partake in the wider space of interaction; a space created through mutual relations. This environment is also described in an article about the religious practices of the Uyghurs of Western China, which apparently have much in common with the practices and beliefs of other Turkic Muslim groups across Central Eurasia (Bellér-Hann 2007). The author explains that for the Uyghurs, life cycle rituals that pertain to death are particularly important and in the aftermath of death "the spirits continue to actively maintain community with the living" (Bellér-Hann 2007, 133).

The personal interaction, as part of religious ritual, with beings that do not entirely belong to this world has been a matter of discussion in Muslim societies for many centuries, as we are going to see in the next section. And likewise in Russia, it has been on the forefront of negotiations about correct behavior in the religious sphere until most recently. To prove the critics of local Islam in the Russian Federation incorrect, the former deputy mufti of Tatarstan, Valiulla Yakupov, for instance, who first promoted "traditional Islam" in the country, reappropriated the Hanbali thinker Ibn Taymiyyah for his purposes (Kefeli 2014, 605–606).[19] Yakupov referred to *ahadith* collected by Ibn Taymiyyah, where the Prophet Muhammad is supposed to have said that the dead can hear the living and answer those who visit their graves, that prophets, saints, and angels meditate between the communities and God, and that Muslims pray, give alms, fast, and go on pilgrimages to improve the situation of their dead relatives and neighbors. In these accounts, the worlds of the living and the dead are separated by only a thin veil.

A Space of Mutual Relations

Whereas the previous section reflected upon local Muslim practices from the point of view of those who are themselves engaged in or approve them, the first part of this section takes into account a more global interpretation of the question. But how exactly to understand global Islam in the context of our discussion? In my interpretation of the term, the most prominent characteristics would be a legal orientation in one's religious outlook, special attention being directed at the individual believer, an inclination toward rational lines of reasoning, Aristotelian logic that allows for both definite answers and precise explanations, as well as a transcendental image of God. To grasp religion in its modern manifestation, DeWeese (2016, 70–71) uses the expression fundamentalism, by which he refers to the textuality of modern religion and an individual engagement with it, the quantification of commitment and the rejection of communal traditions.

Most certainly, it is not my intention to draw a simple black-and-white picture of Islamic interpretation here, with global Islam at one end of the spectrum and local, ethnic, or national variants in opposition to it. To demonstrate that the circumstances are fairly more complicated does not constitute much of a problem. Identifying only the Arabian Peninsula as a source for a renewed Islamization at the end of the Soviet period and in the post-Soviet present, for instance, would be far from the truth. My own research in the Russian Urals suggests that the development of Muslim belief and practice in the region is also influenced by religious conventions in the North Caucasus and Central Asia, Turkey, and Egypt, even though most of these conventions are less influential on a global scale. One must also be aware that current reformist movements are no historical exception, as both Jadidism and the Mujaddidi branch of the Naqshbandi Sufi order advocated religious reform in earlier centuries (DeWeese 2016, 56–58).[20] Curiously, both of them can now be perceived as quite established and in opposition to the new wave of reform. Displaying the structure of how different categories of religious identification relate to one another is no easy task, but I think that we should not be dissuaded to aim at least for an approximation of the situation.

An interaction within a religious frame with someone other than God, as in the practices described above, came to be regarded critically as early as Abbasid times (Sirriyeh 1990, 140–141).

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Points of discussion were the excessive reverence for mortal men, including the caliph, as well as the reverence for *sheikhs* and the dead, with both prophets and *sheikhs* in the latter category. According to Beranek and Tupek (2009, 6), funeral ceremonies and asking God for forgiveness for the sins of fellow believers had originated in other religious traditions, but were still considered very important within Islam during the first 100 years of the new religion's existence.

The legitimacy of visiting the grave of the Prophet Muhammad or the graves of other prophets and saints (*ziyarat*) began to be seriously questioned in ninth-century Iraq and once more in 11th century Syria, with Hanbali scholars comprising the most vehement opposition to this practice (Beranek and Tupek 2009, 10–12). In the eyes of those critics, *ziyarat* was the expression of an idea that runs contrary to the most important principle in Islam: *tawhid*, or the oneness of God. Arguably the most influential figure for the discussion of saint veneration and the visitation of graves would be the medieval scholar Ibn Taymiyyah, who was simultaneously a Hanbali legal philosopher and member of a Sufi brotherhood. Ibn Taymiyyah had a twofold understanding of *tawhid* as everything being created by God and all worship being reserved for God alone. Associating someone or something other with God would have to be considered a violation of the oneness of God and a threat for the Muslim community. The association of someone other with God amounts not only to *bid'ah*, an illegitimate innovation in Islam, but also to *shirk*, the most serious sin in Islam, and usually translated as association or idolatry (Sirriyeh 1990, 139).[21] Often, Sufi Muslims had a slightly different understanding of *tawhid*, rather seeing everything in this life as a reflection of God; an idea known as the unity of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*).[22] As long as they are only reflections of God, turning in prayer to the prophets and saints may be considered legitimate for pilgrims or visitors of a cemetery. For Ibn Taymiyyah, there exists legally permissible as well as unacceptable *ziyarat* (Beranek and Tupek 2009, 13–16). It is acceptable to follow the instructions of the Prophet, greet the dead at their graves, and appeal to God on their behalf, but the visitors must not be dependent upon the dead in any way, they must not request anything from the dead or ask for intercession to improve their own situation. Therefore, Ibn Taymiyyah is not categorically opposed to visiting the graves of the dead, but he firmly objects to mediation, intercession, and turning to them for help.[23] What ultimately worried Ibn Taymiyyah about praying at the graves of prophets, saints, or personal relatives was the temptation of beginning to worship the dead.

Around 400 years later, the work of Ibn Taymiyyah went through a renaissance when some of his ideas were taken up by the Wahhabi movement (Beranek and Tupek 2009, 17–19). The movement emerged in the 18th century in the central region of the Arabian Peninsula and sought to return to a belief system based on the Quran and the prophetic tradition. In this period, quite a few people would undertake pilgrimages to sacred stones, trees, or the graves of saints and directly ask for a favor or aim for saintly intercession with God; practices that the Wahhabis considered to be deviating from Islam in its original form. Certain scholars saw similarities with customs common in pre-Muslim times, a period referred to as *jahiliyya.* In their efforts to reform and purify Muslim belief and practice, the Wahhabis became widely known for acts such as the destruction of graves associated with non-conforming religious behavior, the cutting down of sacred trees and the stoning of adulteresses. In 1806, Wahhabi radicals achieved the demolition of the Baqi' cemetery in Medina that the Prophet Muhammad had regularly visited in his days (Beranek and Tupek 2009, 23).

It is fascinating to see that these kinds of considerations regarding proper religious conduct have not only informed the discussion of Islam in the wider Eurasian space, including Russia, since at least the 19th century now, but that many of the same terms as centuries ago continue to be used in these discourses. The Jadid reform movement initiated by Tatar intellectuals in the Russian Empire in the late 19th century and later spreading to Central Asia differs from the Wahhabi movement in some respects, but it nonetheless aimed for a purification of Islam and can be regarded as one of the currents of a more global interpretation of the religion. Analyzing the Muslim reform movement in Western China in the early 20th century, Alexandre Papas (2016, 165–166) notices two

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dichotomous visions of Islam showing the characteristics one can observe in contemporary Russia today. In the Muslim reformist press, enlightenment was contrasted with obscurantism, moderns with ancients, and scholars with idolaters. The term *jahiliyya* was likewise invoked for the problematic circumstances in society, as perceived by Muslim reformists, and associated with backwardness, superstition, lying, and other negative qualities. People representing these qualities were uneducated *mullahs*, Sufi Muslims and custodians at saintly shrines. For those critics of local Islam, saint veneration represented the main problem (Papas 2016, 173–175).

When taking a comparative perspective on the Muslim reform movement, certain characteristics become visible that suggest an affinity with more general trends associated with modernity. In his interesting comparative discussion of Muslim reformism and Christian Protestantism, Roman Loimeier (2005, 230–231) explains that while rejecting saint veneration and the use of amulets Muslim reform movements typically favor more sober forms of religious practice, such as Quranic recitation. By withdrawing from common Sufi practices, Loimeier argues, a passage occurs from a social and communal Islam to one that shows more individualistic traits. Turning to Max Weber, Loimeier (2005, 248) interprets the anti-iconic tendencies of Muslim reformism as a kind of secularization, with religion and society becoming gradually more rational and anything reminiscent of magic being dismissed as superstition.

By considering practice and therefore forms of behavior that are manifest, we may also attempt to see beyond the immediate to discern a belief system of which those practices are expressions. As I suggested above, a vision of life in a shared space emerges, where Muslims are engaged in an ongoing exchange with a multitude of human and non-human beings inhabiting their surroundings. Such a perception has much in common with systems of belief and religious conduct in so-called egalitarian societies from Siberia to Amazonia that have not been entirely transformed by modernity yet. One of the terms used for this kind of conduct would be ancestor worship and the cosmological order informing it is often called animism. For analytical reasons, it seems helpful to me to apply a concept developed by the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins to those beings—prophets, saints, ancestors, and others—that Muslims interact with in the Russian context. Sahlins (2017, 35) uses the concept of metaperson to refer to anything from gods, ghosts, ancestors, demons, or spirits—entities that are endowed with authority and feared, respected, venerated, and worshipped. For societies where people interact with metapersons, the universe is not a space reserved for humans and animals alone and devoid of supernatural beings, as assumed by modern science, but it can be considered a personalized universe where humans and non-humans constantly interact (Fienup-Riordan 2017, 134).

One aspect commonly associated with animism would be the idea of each person being an agent but also being acted upon, thus producing a complex web of agency between persons, including those who have passed away (Vitebsky 1993, 5–9). This seems to me an appropriate description of the processes at work among Ural Muslims.[24] Conversely, it would mean going too far to argue with this part of Russia in mind that the living and the dead constitute one another and that persons need to be understood in terms of each other, as classically the case with animism. Also the term "ecstatic religion" that Ioan Lewis (2003, xix) came up with to think of spirit possession in connection with celestial flight does not contribute to capturing the reality on the ground. A further difference pertains to the character of those beings that the living interact with, as they tend to be of an ambivalent nature in animistic traditions but I only encountered them as benevolent in the Uralic environment (Lewis 2003, 153; Vitebsky 1993, 73).[25]

In the end, it might not be that relevant which name we give to this specific outlook on the universe and our place within it. The anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli (2019) rejects not only the term animism but also related concepts such as totemism, naturalism, and analogism, as they confine the diversity of the phenomenon to a number of key points and try to fix a lived and permanently evolving tradition in time. The sheer pervasiveness of those ideas across cultures demonstrates that they are more widely shared than one would assume when only employing the term animism. In reference to Tatar sacred sites, Urazmanova et al. (2014, 30) evoke Émile

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Durkheim, who declared that historically the first prayers were addressed to the spirits of the dead, the first memorial practices were mourning ceremonies, and the first memorial sites were graves. The empirical material from Russia suggests that in the case of vernacular Muslim practices associated with "traditional Islam" the world of the living can merge with the world of the dead and even if God should be distant and far-removed, his intermediaries are usually in reach. The idea of transcendence so typical of the major religious traditions does here give way to immanence (Sahlins 2017, 64). In one and the same world, mortal men exist alongside saints possessing miraculous powers, spirits of the dead and carved wood calling out to God on its own accord.

I wish to make clear that I consider the above conceptualization of the human and more-than-human condition very much a part of Islam. Since the scope of this article is limited, it was hardly possible to look into comparable ideas in those parts of the Muslim world whose heritage differs from that of Central Eurasia.[26] As Shahab Ahmed has argued in his ground breaking study "What is Islam?" (2016), Islam has assumed a much different shape in many periods and cultures than the "protectors" of religion wish to make us believe today.

Conclusion

This article was concerned with practices belonging to the category of "traditional Islam" in Russia. Not unlike Russian Orthodox identification, Muslim identification in the Russian context is closely connected to ethnic and national sentiment. Both the land and some of its minority cultures leave their imprint on the specific shape that Islam assumes under these circumstances. We saw this, for instance, in the *mawlid* celebration described above, where participants are singing in their native languages and a few senior members of the congregation encourage everyone to adopt the traditional clothing of their ancestors. Religious practices that are tied to a particular locale may also assume a different meaning on more abstract levels of interpretation, confirming the relevance of perceiving these identities in combination with one another. An example would be the pilgrimage to Bolghar—an ancient city and the former capital of Volga Bulgaria, now located in Tatarstan—and the prayer at the graves of the khans buried there. While the place used to be a minor pilgrimage site, it now attracts several thousand people who assemble every summer for the "Bolgar zhyeny," the gathering of the Muslims in Bolghar, and it has become a symbol of both Tatar religious and ethnic belonging (Zavgarova 2018).

Both in the approach to the issue of "traditional Islam" and in the analysis of the material, the spatial dimension stands out and demands our attention. When thinking of Islam primarily in abstract terms, the connection to other more rooted identities can easily be overlooked. The concept of lived religion profits here from the geographical confinement implicit in the term everyday nationalism. Thinking of religion as entirely separate of national, ethnic, or local identities and detached from territory would mean isolating certain components of the research material, from which the arguments presented in these pages are developed. Potentially, everyday nationalism may further contribute to how social anthropologists engage with religion by encouraging them to turn to the concrete and material. This is especially true for Geertzian approaches that remain preoccupied with signification and meaning. All too often, the small things that form part of the ritual routines of religious believers or the locations where these practices take place are considered relevant only insofar as they refer to "something bigger." Under such circumstances, everyday nationalism can help to draw us back down to earth. When considering Islam beyond the academic sphere, the aforementioned abstraction from the lived reality is problematic insofar as it ignores expressions of Muslim belief that do not fit the template and it may even turn on these expressions and declare them incorrect, schismatic, or heretic. Accepting the premise that the illustration of particular practices can only be the beginning of analysis, the last section of the text engages with the discussion of vernacular Muslim practices from a global Muslim perspective.[27] It then illuminates the belief system behind those practices without undeserved moral judgment. From this point of

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view, a picture emerges where local Muslims find themselves subjected to the laws of a personalized universe. In this reality, the here and now is not entirely isolated from the hereafter and the living and the dead, along with those in a state in between, exchange favors and rely on each others' help and support. Lived religion, as we saw above, is about engagement with the world and this world must not be imagined as empty or unresponsive. The deep Ural forests and the hills with their Muslim graves are awake and alive.[28] In addition, a Sufi Muslim is expected to be perceptive in regard to the world around him, as the shabby dog in the street might actually be God in disguise. In an animate universe of that kind, death does not constitute the end but only a transition from one state to the other.

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Notes

1 For a similar case of a Muslim village being divided, see Sagitova (2014) writing about Penza Oblast.
2 See also Elbasani and Tošić (2017, 3–4) for nation-centric interpretations of Islam in the post-socialist Balkans.
3 This *kalam* school is known to be open toward Sufism and approves Persian interpretations of Islam. For the close connection between Maturidism and Hanafism, see Rudolph (1997, 14–15). A minor percentage of Muslims in Russia, those with origins in the North Caucasus, belong to the Shafi'i instead of the Hanafi tradition.
4 I am not the first scholar to analyse Muslim minority culture in Russia from the perspective of everyday nationalism. For another instance, see Yusupova (2018).
5 All of the following are insights gained during periods of fieldwork in the Russian Urals.
6 Again, we see here how national and ethnic identity are not being treated as mutually exclusive. Vidacs (2011, 26) similarly thinks of ethnic, tribal, and national identities in Africa in relation to one another.
7 Personal communication with practicing Muslim in Perm Krai on July 8, 2015. I have backed up my empirical material with information from the website of an event planner from Vladimir (http://xn--33-6kcaalni1aqfv2e1a1p.xn--p1ai/Kak_pominayut_usopshego_po_musulmanskoy_religioznoy_traditsii_/).
8 Personal communication with Sufi Muslim in Ufa on December 22, 2016.
9 Personal communication with Haqqani disciple in Central Bashkortostan on July 15, 2018.
10 Personal communication with religious science scholar Maksim Cherepanov on July 20, 2015.
11 Personal communication with practicing Muslim in Perm Krai on July 8, 2015.
12 For more information, see https://islam-today.ru/veroucenie/sleduem-sunne-6-pravil-posesenia-kladbisa/.
13 Conveniently, the author of the online article does not mention that in the latter *hadith* God had permitted the Prophet to visit the grave but withheld his permission to ask forgiveness for the sins of his mother.

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14 Personal communication with two Sufi *murids* on July 7, 2018.
15 This phrase invokes the image of the apocalyptic figure *dajjal*, who is often portrayed with one eye open and the other one closed.
16 The terms *khalifa* and *pir* are commonly used in Sufi circles.
17 Personal communication with practicing Muslim in Perm Krai on July 8, 2015.
18 Both the recitation and the tool used in the recitation are called *tasbih*.
19 For more information on Valiulla Yakupov and his ideas, see Bustanov and Kemper (2013).
20 Jadidism tends to be portrayed as a movement that was striving for a balance of Islam and Enlightenment values based on Western scientific and technological achievements, even though affinities with more fundamentalist currents in Islam exist, as we are going to see further below. The Mujaddidi branch of the Naqshbandi Sufi brotherhood is one of the two paths with a considerable history in the Urals. Its followers are usually strict in regard to the implementation of the religious obligations. See von Kügelgen (1998) for the historical expansion of the group throughout Central Asia.
21 There are, however, innovations pertaining to religion that can also be regarded as legitimate.
22 See Knysh (1995) for an elaboration of the concept.
23 The Hanbali scholar and Ibn Taymiyyah disciple Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya likewise distinguishes between the legal and the heretical *ziyarat*, seeing the former as an act of charity (*ihsan*) for both the dead and the visitor at the grave, as the visitor may be rewarded by God.
24 See Mittermaier (2012) for an analogous description of the relational worlds of members of a Sufi community in Egypt.
25 Bellér-Hann (2007, 135), however, paints a similarly ambivalent picture of Uyghur Muslim belief and practice, where the spirits of the dead can curse the living.
26 Van Bruinessen (1999) pays some attention to vernacular traditions in his discussion of the concepts of local and global in relation to Islam in Indonesia.
27 Obviously, global Islam also relies on specific places of education and learning, financial support, and political decision-making.
28 Some of my most recent research shows a certain conflation of the idea that Muslim saints guard their territories and that forests, lakes, and other natural sites are watched over by nature masters, but this would be material for an article in its own right.

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