Beyond the Imperial Box
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As Though We Hid the Sun in a Sea of Stories

Fragmente zu einer Geopoetik Nordeurasiens

Als hätten wir die Sonne verscharrt im Meer der Geschichten
Beyond the Imperial Box: Exploring Muslim Subjectivity

Alfrid Bustanov

In colonial terms. In the Russophone academic realm, postcolonial critique was late to arrive in Russia and had little effect on the way the Orientalist industry continues to operate institutionally and discursively. The western modes of aesthetic and intellectual representation continue to dictate the articulation of nationalism, secularity, and modernity. Is there a way out of the imperial box—a discursive space defined through and by colonial encounter? Is there a vocabulary of imagination that would allow for epistemic freedom from the imposed colonial structures associated with violence and loss? Is there hope for an intellectual and artistic environment that would heal the wounds of the colonial past (and present) and open doors for the creative forms of non-imperial futures?

An academic journey in search of possible alternatives and critique of the imperial lens has led me towards the historical anthropology of Muslim subjectivities and activist projects beyond academia. Our research group initially engaged with private archival collections and critiques of the state archives as a starting point of investigation. Working with the heirs of the Muslim traditions in inner Russia (the European part of Russia) that we were interested in, they introduced us to a new world of individual and collective identities as well as (archival) narratives irreducible to the linear developmentalism of post-Soviet nationalism. Personal histories and trans-generational breaks in forms of self-fashioning revealed narratives beyond complete loyalty to the assimilating regime as well as active struggles against it.

To make sense of the complex archival realities that we faced during our fieldwork in inner Russia and Daghestan, our research team proposed a conceptual view on the study of Muslim subjectivity. This view includes a recognition of four interconnected layers that enable one’s meaningful self-conception.

1 Vladimir Bobrovnikov, 'Pochemu my marginaly? (Zametki na polakh russkogo perevoda "Orientalizma" Edvarda Saida)' ['Почему мы маргинальны? (Заметки на полях русского перевода "Ориентализма" Эдварда Сайда)], Ab Imperio 2 (2008), 325–344.

2 The project MIND: The Muslim Individual in Imperial and Soviet Russia
The most abstract level is cultural repertoire, which covers the historical experience of a community and the sum of languages describing it. This level is never fully comprehensible to individuals, whose access to selected elements of cultural repertoire is limited by the behavioural models fashionable in a particular time and space. These models comprise a version of the ideal Muslim personality through a set of texts, ideas, and practices celebrating a view on individuality. Within a model, individuals construct their personas or publicly performed visions of the self. As historians, we read multiple personas in cultural production, be that texts, visuals, or entire archives. Personas can also project collective identities as in the case of the Mufti community in late Soviet Russia, who conceptualized their collective body through the production and maintenance of a visual code in photography. Not everything, however, can be thoughtfully expressed on the level of persona. Archival space offers possibilities for hybrid subjectivities where the self comes to the forefront and defies easy classifications. The self can combine elements that we would read as belonging to multiple models and personas, exposing the often unconscious subjective fragmentation and the failure to present a coherent sense of self. These four levels of subjectivity allow for a nuanced study of Muslim personhood, accounting for the strength of conscious modelling on the part of individuals and groups as well as the uncertainties of the self that manifest even on the material level, such as cutting out paragraphs in a diary or rearranging one’s photographic archive shortly before death.

Our project postulated a departure from the traditional themes of colonial Orientalism, with its emphasis on male intellectuals and their contributions to history writing, legal discourse, and mysticism. With a focus on ego-documents, such as private letters, poetry, and photographs, we looked at the dynamic self-conceptions of individuals, including women and classes beyond the scholarly elite. Our team consulted those sources in private archives scattered across Tatar settlements in inner Russia, Finland, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkey.

We focused on the interplay of visual and textual dimensions of self-fashioning to identify the concepts that had informed respective practices of building one’s (archival) self. Individuals we studied had to have described their lives at the juncture of imperial and Muslim ideas about space and time. While official documentation in the nineteenth century (i.e. family registers) was dominated by colonial concepts translated into Tatar—including the usage of the Christian calendar and the rules of imperial administrative division—the private sphere allowed for alternative chronologies and geographies. Interestingly, the colophons of semi-personal manuscripts meant for circulation in madrasa circles served as a vehicle for situating oneself in time and space. A scribe would provide a full name with a nisba (an attributive name), in some cases listing a genealogical chain that went up to twelve generations back. Scribes operating in the Volga-Ural region often associated themselves with the hagiographic idea of Bulghar being a land of Islam since the time the Prophet’s first followers came to the region and were buried there. The vast lands...
These spatial terms go back to the Mongol era but were reconceptualized in the nineteenth century as *tariqa*, which is a direct translation from Russian. The cities of Kazan, Astrakhan, and Kasimov retained their pre-Russian modes of spatial conceptualization right up to the Soviet era. In Islamic sources, Kazan was systematically called Ghazan, Astrakhan was Hajji Tarkhan, and Kasimov remained Khan Kirman. Alternative geographies articulated alongside the Islamic calendar became part of an individual self-fashioning that produced an illusion of living in a predominantly Muslim environment.

Language use was another important element in self-cultivation and self-representation. Linguistic plurality had been the norm for many centuries in this part of the world. During earlier epochs, between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, Persian worked in tandem with Arabic and Turkic idioms. Already in the mid-eighteenth century, Russian rose in prominence, alongside the increasing prestige of Arabic towards the twentieth century. A combination of Tatar and Chaghatay and downplay Russian for their own benefit. Avoiding or pretending ignorance of Russian remained a stable practice right up to the fall of the Soviet Union. Ottoman Turkish appeared on the scene briefly at the turn of the twentieth century, marking the popularity of Muslim reformism and the spread of the press. Contrary to the state-driven approach towards the history of Islam in Russia, the transformation of Islamic languages under the Bolsheviks was not linear. Not only did the shifts to Latin and Cyrillic scripts not take place overnight, these changes also contributed to the widening of options in writing the self: one could now play with multiple languages as well as scripts to convey or encrypt messages depending on the situation. For example, one Tatar writer who was a member of the Union of Writers of the Tatar Republic started writing his diaries in Arabic-script Tatar in the 1910s, then turned to the Roman alphabet, and finally accepted Sovietized forms of literary Tatar, which were a product of purges and cultural politics between the 1920s and 1940s. Even though Arabic and Persian became almost non-existent in Soviet Russia (i.e. in Tatar writing), Arabic script literacy persisted well into the 1990s. As was the case with chronotopes, individual language strategies were key to self-perception and to public and personal forms of subjectivity, conveying divergent messages to different audiences (even if only imaginary ones).

Much discourse about subjectivity concerns the rediscovery of the agency of the colonized subjects and the parallel process of marginalizing the authority of the colonizer. Zainap Maksudova (1897-1980), for instance, was a scion of a long line of Muslim literati in the Viatka governorate who graduated from a reformist school of great regional prominence, and worked as a schoolteacher of Russian in Soviet Kazan. Maksudova led a double life full of fascination with Islamic high culture in the Volga-Urals. Throughout her long life, Maksudova built an impressive private collection of old books and manuscripts that inspired her to research beyond contemporary Soviet academia.

Her approach to Islamic epistemology was notable for...
In doing so, she was not “objective” nor pretended to be. Her approach was certainly not about objectification of Islam. Rather, her private archive presents her as a dignified heir of an authoritative dynasty who was very much aware (and proud) of her background. In turn, she believed she had the right to an opinion on the cultural, literary, and intellectual developments in the region that happened over almost a millennium.

This aspect preconditioned the second feature of her approach: for Maksudova, the sources she worked with were not part of secularized national heritage. As an heir of the tradition, she claimed the right to intervene textually in the manuscripts she studied. In the spirit of her profession, she would habitually correct the spellings of the eighteenth-century scribes and leave comments inside the historical texts. Such an approach was unthinkable to secular Orientalists of the late socialist era, who would only leave remarks highlighting data relevant for attribution or to restrict access to texts due to their supposed lack of academic merit. In addition, Maksudova donated items from her family’s estate to academic institutions during her life and instructed her daughter to bequeath the rest after Maksudova’s death, as she viewed this deed of transfer in the classical terms of the Islamic waqf. That is, a pious donation of property to an institution, with no right to sell it. This terminology questioned the official position of the state manuscript collections, which took their authority solely from secular sources.

Thirdly, except for a few articles that Maksudova published in Tatar periodicals of the 1960s and 1970s, she mainly wrote her scholarly texts in Arabic-script Tatar, a language that had more in common with pre-revolutionary intellectual traditions than with Soviet national paradigms. It would be wrong, however, to claim that Maksudova operated outside of the colonial mainstream. In fact, her approach was national in character but in many respects, diverged from the particular ideas and practices of the Soviet academic or literary environment in Kazan of that era. Her take on manuscripts was not declarative but content-based, as she felt at home with any type of Muslim text, ranging from
Tatar of the pre-Soviet style. Vakhidi and Maksudova first met in 1922 and she later inventoried parts of his archive at the Institute of History, Language, and Literature of the Kazan branch of the USSR Academy of Sciences.

Even though I remain an admirer of Maksudova’s life project and the self-esteem she displayed under the harsh living conditions of her time, there is one aspect that disappoints me: Maksudova and her associates constructed epistemic alternatives to the Soviet project while simultaneously upholding the modern thinking inherited from Muslim reformists of the early twentieth century. By necessity, this choice evoked engagement with Soviet educational and academic institutions while marginalizing or excluding pre-modern cultural forms.

The pitiful observation that we owe a great deal of historical evidence to modernist thinking has led to the absence of many themes and objects in the modernist canon and failed to be valued by the colonial archive. Thematically, sex and the occult has proved to be the most provocative in this regard, as both were heavily disregarded by Soviet scholarship. The pre-modern forms of sexuality articulated in literary texts full of humour were already hardly understandable to the first generations of Muslim reformists at the turn of the twentieth century who adopted the modern set of morals that deemed sex shameful to discuss.

Similarly, the culture of same-sex relationships that continued into the twentieth century was not recognized as a topic of academic interest. As a result, themes related to sex appeared marginal in the manuscript collections of Kazan, Leningrad, and Ufa in the course of the twentieth century.


The owners of private archives of the late Socialist era are partly responsible for this. In addition to the modernist enmity towards popular superstitions and magic, the manuscript keepers themselves were not ready to part ways with the objects that they used in their everyday lives and let them vanish into the secular archives. For example, Muhammad Taqi Ghaifarov (1885–1954) was an imam in the village of Mazabashi in what is today part of the Republic of Mari El. He had collected an impressive library, later to be inherited by his daughter Amina (1916–1979) and then her sister Manfusa (1925–2011). Despite several scholarly visits from Kazan and elsewhere that resulted in a transfer of the biggest part of the collection to the university library, the sisters retained texts of an occult nature. I witnessed the continuation of this practice in relation to Ghaifarov’s early-nineteenth-century manuscripts while visiting Nailia, Manfusa’s daughter, in 2021. Even though Muhammad Taqi sympathized with Muslim reformists and the family was fond of Tatar national historians, the family owned a large portion of occult texts that remain excluded from secularized archives. Here, we see the readiness not only to engage with models of Soviet or Muslim reformist character but also to continuously retain the value of pre-modern cultural practices up to the present day.

In our study of Muslim subjectivity, thinking about decolonial histories of Islam has taken shape in two interconnected forms. One is partaking in the established academic industry by organizing conferences and producing scholarly texts. Another is a more activist form that appreciates engagement with subjectivities of the past, seeking to make them part of contemporary everyday life.

Before the current Russian invasion of Ukraine, active engagement with mass media in Russia opened the possibilities for our project to have direct influence in the cultural sphere of contemporary Tatar culture and to promote concepts that go beyond the colonial (post-)Soviet vocabulary.
realized the need for a new language for both communal and individual self-determination. These efforts made possible an exhibition on the history of Tatar manuscripts at the new space of the National Library of the Republic of Tatarstan in Kazan. This exhibition was unprecedented in terms of its scale and hosted a summer school and multiple other events that repeatedly questioned the dominance and linearity of the colonial narrative. These activities were complemented by public open-air lectures and collaborations with art projects addressing alternative historical imaginaries. Some of the activism remained hidden in the museum’s archives: between 2020 and 2021, I inventoried almost two thousand manuscripts that had been acquired via archaeographic expeditions decades ago and still remained unidentified. This experience had a lot to do with subjectivity as it made me cognizant of the deep power structures that inform the organization of state archives when it comes to historical objects associated with Islam in Russia.