



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### After Deportation: Chechen and Ingush Sufi Groups and their Zikr Rituals in Soviet Kazakhstan

Albogachieva, M. S.-G.; Kemper, M.

**DOI**

[10.1515/asia-2023-0031](https://doi.org/10.1515/asia-2023-0031)

**Publication date**

2024

**Document Version**

Submitted manuscript

**Published in**

Asiatische Studien

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Albogachieva, M. S.-G., & Kemper, M. (2024). After Deportation: Chechen and Ingush Sufi Groups and their *Zikr* Rituals in Soviet Kazakhstan. *Asiatische Studien*, 78(2), 247-266. <https://doi.org/10.1515/asia-2023-0031>

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

*UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (<https://dare.uva.nl>)*

## After deportation:

### Chechen and Ingush Sufi groups and their *zikr* rituals in Soviet Kazakhstan

#### Abstract:

The present paper investigates the history of the Kunta-Hajji (Qadiriyya) Sufi groups (*virids*) of Chechen and Ingush deportees during their enforced exile in Soviet Kazakhstan (1944-1957/1963). On the basis of anthropological fieldwork among survivors, returnees, and their offspring, the authors argue that the Ingush and Chechen deportees perceived the *virids* as an important moral support network and a pillar of their identity in a foreign and inimical environment. In the absence of dominant shaykhs and formal chains of transmissions, flat hierarchies allowed for an easy admission into the *virids*, and for flexibility in the adaptation of the “loud” *zikir* circle dances to the terrible conditions of forced exile. The article reviews the various groups and their particular practices. Of particular interest is the emergence of a new *virid* among Chechen believers in northern Kazakhstan, and the integration of female participants into the *zikr* ritual of that group.

#### Key words:

Soviet deportation – Sufism – Kunta-Hajji – Qadiriyya brotherhood – *zikr* (*dhikr*) ritual – female Islam

**Word count:** 8.063 (incl. footnotes)

The history of the Ingush and Chechen Kunta-Hajji Sufi groups (*virids*) is still full of riddles. While these groups regard themselves as belonging to the Qadiriyya Sufi brotherhood (*tariqa*), the ways how their founder, the Chechen Kunta-Hajji (d. 1867), received the Qadiriyya teaching is still in the dark. Also, as Kunta-Hajji’s teaching has largely been preserved in oral form, there is a wide range of interpretations concerning his actual teachings and Sufi practice. One of the most debated questions is his alleged “pacifism”, that is, his rejection of calls to *jihadi* resistance against Russian colonial rule; another central issue concerns his way of performing and prescribing the “vocal” *zikr* (“remembrance of God”, Arab. *dhikr*), the famous circle dances with chants (and partly, with music) that up to our days characterize the Kunta-Hajji *virids* in the public eye. The quick emergence of sub-branches after Kunta-Hajji’s disappearance is another area of unresolved questions; do the new subgroups (*virids*) reflect personal, clan-based, ethnic or territorial divisions within a common framework? And importantly, in how far did (or do) these *virids*, taken together, constitute the core of what it meant to be a Chechen or Ingush Muslim? Research into these fields is complicated by the scarcity of indigenous written accounts, the misleading character of imperial Russian and Soviet accounts, but also by the close-knit nature of the Sufi groups themselves and the families which support them.

The present article wants to shed light on some of these questions through the case study of the Vainakh (i.e. Ingush and Chechen) Sufi groups active in Soviet Central Asia, to where the whole Chechen and Ingush nations were deported in February of 1944. The goal of this paper is to outline the establishment of Ingush and Chechen Sufi groups in post-war Kazakhstan, and to point out some remarkable specifics that call for further research. One of these specifics is the robust continuity of the groups in the absence of living shaykhs who would, in other Sufi brotherhoods (including in the Qadiriyya as we know it from other places), function as preservers and transmitters of Sufi knowledge, and whose names are, in Sunni *tariqas*, integrated into the ever-growing spiritual chains (*silsilas*) of Sufi transmission. Does the practical absence of living shaykhs among the *virids* (and thus also of a “living” *silsila*) result from the violence of deportation, or to the contrary, did deportation – the wholesale removal of small nations, and their dispersal over wide steppe areas, under horrible conditions – facilitate the emergence of new, independent groups? The second question that this paper touches upon is the proliferation of various *zikh* styles, which again includes a number of innovations concerning the integration of musical instruments and the admission of women as participants – an astounding feature among ethnic communities that are otherwise regarded as quite patriarchic. Finally, one also wonders how in the light of the enduring repression the Ingush and Chechens managed to retain the overarching unity of the Kunta-Hajji cluster of *virids*, and how they related to Kazakh, Uzbek or other Sufi groups that equally suffered from Stalinist repression.<sup>1</sup>

Scholars of Soviet social history have pointed to the ambiguities around the situation of the deported nations (who in Soviet documents were euphemistically referred to as *spetspereselentsy*, “special settlers”). There can be no doubt that the Chechens and Ingush in Kazakhstan were treated very harshly and lived under abominable conditions, and therefore must have detested the Soviet administration that removed them forcibly from their homelands and kept them under tight police control. At the same time the deported individuals were dependent on that very NKVD administration for survival, and were therefore forced to adapt to the system. Soviet administrative documents give evidence of active integration.<sup>2</sup> Anthropological research, however, tends to accentuate the narrative of suffering and victimhood, and adds information about the maintenance of Islamic practices that were carried out in defiance of the repressive

---

<sup>1</sup> Allen J. Frank, *Gulag Miracles: Sufis and Stalinist Repression in Soviet Kazakhstan* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Isaac Scarborough, “An Unwanted Dependence: Chechen and Ingush Deportees and the Development of State-Citizen Relations in Late-Stalinist Kazakhstan (1944–1953), *Central Asian Survey*, 36:1 (2017), 93-112.

system. As there is no research yet on written accounts that the deported themselves might have produced (and the manuscripts they might have produced), our knowledge about Islamic practices among the exiled Vainakh is highly depending on oral accounts by witnesses and their family members.

As of date there is no systematic study of Sufi activities of Ingush and Chechens deportees. The present paper offers information obtained from survivors of the deportation and their offspring who remained in Kazakhstan;<sup>3</sup> these accounts were collected by the first author of the present paper, during her fieldwork in Kazakhstan in 2020 and 2021. The data set comprised 47 interviews with ethnic Chechens and Ingush, aged 40 to 85; these men and women were able to tell about their own experiences during and after deportation, or could reproduce the narratives of their parents or grandparents.<sup>4</sup> Equally used for this article are results from the first author's previous work among Ingush who managed to return to Ingushetia after Stalin's death, mostly between 1957 and 1963. The material presented here adds to Michaela Pohl's fieldwork among Chechens and Ingush in northern Kazakhstan in the late 1990s and 2000.<sup>5</sup> For the historical contexts we draw in particular on Mairbek Vachagaev's publications on the Chechen and Ingush *virid* structures as well as on Zharas A. Ermekbaev's history of the Chechen and Ingush in Soviet and post-Soviet Kazakhstan.<sup>6</sup>

### **Kunta-Hajji and his successor *virids***

---

<sup>3</sup> In Kazakhstan's national census of 2009, 15.120 persons identified themselves as Ingush and 31.431 as Chechen. See Agency on Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *Results of the 2009 National Population Census of the Republic of Kazakhstan: Analytical Report* (Astana, 2011). In the 1990s, the number of Chechens and Ingush residents in Kazakhstan even increased, with new Vainakh immigrants fleeing from the 1992 Ossetian-Ingush conflict over the Prigorodnyi rayon and the First and Second Russian-Chechen wars. See Zharas Ermekbaev, *Chechentsy i Ingushy v Kazakhstane. Istoriia i sud'by* (Almaty: Daik-Press, 2009), 274.

<sup>4</sup> Makka S.-G. Albogachieva, *Islam v sotsial'noi zhizni ingushei: istoriia, praktiki, institutsii (XVIII-nachalo XXI v.)*. Dissertatsiia na soiskanie stepeni doktora istoricheskikh nauk (St. Petersburg, 2021), 68.

<sup>5</sup> Michaela Pohl, "'It Cannot Be that Our Graves Will be Here': The Survival of Chechen and Ingush Deportees in Kazakhstan, 1944-1957", *Journal of Genocide Research* 4.3 (2002): 401-430. Also published as M. Pol', "'Neuzheli eti zemli mogiloi nashei stanut?' Chechentsy i ingushi v Kazakhstane (1944-1957 gg.)", *Diaspory*, 2:2002, 158-204.

<sup>6</sup> Mairbek Vachagaev, "Reabilitatsiia narodov Severnogo Kavkaza: osnovnye problemy chechentsev i ingushei v period s 1957-go do nachala 1990-kh godov", *Kavkaz i globalizatsiia*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2009), 164-173; Mairbek Vachagaev, *Sheikhi i ziiaraty Chechni* (Moscow: Mozhaiskii Poligrafkombinat, 2009); Ermekbaev, *Chechentsy i Ingushy v Kazakhstane*. See also *Ingushi: deportatsiia, vozvrashchenie, reabilitatsiia 1944-2004. Dokumenty, materialy, kommentarii*, ed. Iakub S. Patiev (Magas: Serdalo, 2004).

Kunta-Hajji Kishiev emerged as the major shaykh of the Chechen and Ingush lands during the last years of the North Caucasus imamate, the jihad state that included most of Dagestan and Chechnya. According to various accounts, Imam Shamil – the last in the line of the three Avar leaders of that jihad state who ruled between 1834 and 1859 – was anxious about Kunta, and forced him to leave the North Caucasus. There is no clear documentation as to where Kunta-Hajji went to; his epithet implies he performed the *hajj* pilgrimage to Mecca, which might indeed have brought him into contact with Sufi masters of the Qadiriyya.<sup>7</sup> When Shamil was defeated and his imamate eliminated, Kunta-Hajji returned, and started preaching and initiating *murids*. It is reported that he called upon his followers to refrain from violence, both among themselves and against the Russian colonial overlords, and to concentrate on personal piety instead. His success is often explained by the assumption that after decades of war and destruction, the Chechen and Ingush people were exhausted, and longed for messages of peace.<sup>8</sup>

In Russian publications and documents of the time, the Kunta-Hajjis were called *zikristy*, after their vocal *zikh* that is so characteristic for the group.<sup>9</sup> Russian accounts also claim that Kunta set up a network of *murids* (Sufi followers) and *vakils* (representatives) that functioned as a kind of administration in parallel to the colonial administration. How that worked is unclear. We know that Kunta-Hajji functioned as an arbiter in local legal feuds; a letter sent by him (but not necessarily written by him personally) implies he might have had some formal education in Islamic law, and perhaps in Arabic.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile his growing followership concerned not only the major rival Sufi brotherhood of the North East Caucasus – the Naqshbandiyya khalidiyya with its many Dagestani shaykhs that had supported the *jihad* – but also the Russian authorities. Reportedly his teachings had eschatological elements, thereby arousing the question whether his peaceful attitude was of temporary nature only, to be replaced by a more militant one once he felt the End of Times was

---

<sup>7</sup> Moshe Gammer, “The Qadiriyya in the Northern Caucasus”, *Journal of the History of Sufism* 1-2 (2000), 275-94.

<sup>8</sup> On Kunta’s biography and teachings see Vakhit Kh. Akaev, *Sheikh Kunta-Khadzhi: Zhizn’ i uchenie* (Groznyi: Nauchno-issledovatel'skii institut gumanitarnykh nauk Chechenskoi respublikii, 1994); Dzhuzhetta Meskhidze, “Kunta-khadzhi, Kishi (rubezh XVIII-XIX vv. – 1867)”, *Islam na territorii byvshei rossiiskoi imperii. Entsiklopedicheskii slovar'*, ed. St. M. Prozorov, vol. I (Moscow, 2006), 227-228; Michael Kemper and Shamil Shikhaliev, Shamil, “Kunta-Hājji”, in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam Three*, ed. by Kate Fleet et al. (Brill, 2021).

<sup>9</sup> A.P. Ippolitov, “Uchenie ‘zikh’ i ego posledovateli v Chechni i Argunskom okruge”, *Sbornik svedeniĭ o kavkazskikh gortsakh*, II (Tiflis, 1869), 2-16.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Kemper and Shamil Shikhaliev, “Kunta Hajji and the Stolen Horse”, *Sharī‘a in the Russian Empire: The Reach and Limits of Islamic Law in Central Eurasia, 1550-1917*, ed. by Paolo Sartori and Danielle Ross (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 281-298.

near. In 1864 the Russians arrested Kunta-Hajji; when his followers came to the fortress of Shali to demand Kunta's release they were shot at, which led to a fight in which more than 150 adherents of the shaykh lost their lives.<sup>11</sup> Shaykh Kunta-Hajji was exiled to the village of Ustiuzhna in the guberniya of Novgorod, where he reportedly passed away in 1867. It was there, in Russia's North, that one of his disciples, a certain 'Abdassalam, wrote down the only text known from Kunta-Hajji, a work called *Maqalat* ("Sayings").<sup>12</sup> In the aftermath of the repression of his movement, thousands of Chechens were forced to leave their homes and move to the Ottoman Empire, where they formed diaspora communities. Exile thus played a huge role in the development of the Kunta-Hajjis, right from the start.

After his arrest new sub-groups of his brotherhood emerged in Chechnya and Ingushetia, which are called *virids* (Arab. *wird*, "litany", after the texts that a shaykh assigns his followers to recite). These *virids* are still known under the names of Kunta's most popular successors and followers: Batal-Hajji Belkhoroev (d. 1914),<sup>13</sup> Husayn-Hajji Gardanov (d. 1914), Bammattgirey Mitaev (d. 1910), Chim-Mirza Taumerzaev, Mani-Shaykh Nazirov (1860-?), and, after WWII, Vis-Hajji Zagiev (d. 1973).<sup>14</sup> The first two of these *virids* are Ingush, the others are Chechen or mixed. These new groups stand next to the Kunta-Hajji *virid* proper that did not adopt the name of any of Kunta's successors. Mostly in hiding from the Russian and then Soviet authorities, each group sought to distinguish itself from others by the way they practiced the vocal *zikr*, and also by special elements of their gear.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Christian W. Dettmering, *Russlands Kampf gegen Sufis: Die Integration der Tschetschenen und Inguschen in das Russische Reich 1810-1880* (Oldenburg: Dryas-Verlag, 2011), 290-296.

<sup>12</sup> Kunta Hājji, *Tarjamat Maqālāt al-Shaykh al-fāḍil wal-ustādh al-kāmīl al-Hājji Kunta al-Michighīshī al-Ilīskhānī* [Arabic text with Kumyk transl. by Shikhammat Qadi Baibulatov] (Temir Khan Shura: Mavraev, 1910). For an analysis see Anna Zelkina, "Some Aspects of the Teaching of Kunta Hājji on the Basis of the Manuscript by 'Abd al-Salām Written in 1862 AD", *Journal of the History of Sufism* 1-2 (2000), 483-507; Shamil' Sh. Shikhaliev, "Kratkii obzor arabograficheskikh sochinenii Kunta-xadzhi Kishieva", *Islam v Rossii i za ee predelami: istoriia, obshchestvo, kul'tura. Sbornik materialov mezhhregional'noi konferentsii, posviashchennoi 100-letiiu so dnia konchiny vydaiushchegosia religioznogo deiatelia sheikh Batal-khadzhi Belkharoeva*, ed. M.S.-G. Albogachieva (Magas: Muzei antropologii i etnografii im. Petra Velikogo [Kunstkamera] RAN, 2011), 71-75.

<sup>13</sup> On him see Julietta Meskhidze, "Shaykh Battal Hajji from Surkhokhi: towards the History of Islam in Ingushetia", *Central Asian Survey* 25.1-2 (2006), 179-191.

<sup>14</sup> Makka S.-G. Albogachieva, "Adepty Kunta-khadzhi Kishieva", in *Islam v Rossii i za ee predelami*, 28-35.

<sup>15</sup> Makka S.-G. Albogachieva, "Kunta-khadzhi Kishiev, ego propoved' i posledovateli", in: *Sheikh, Ustaz, Ovliia Kunta-Khadzhi Kishiev: sbornik statei*, ed. P.-Kh. Albogachiev (Nal'chik: Tetragraf, 2012), 101-107; Vachagaev, *Sheikhi i ziiaraty Chechni*, 56-65.

When the Soviets came to power, the Chechens and Ingush “received” their own autonomous entity, the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (within the Soviet Russian republic, the RSFSR), which however did not encompass all lands inhabited by the two Vainakh nations. Like elsewhere in the Caucasus, the regime’s policy of *korenizatsiia* (enrooting) aimed at the development of a secular and loyal national elite with the correct ideological convictions. In parallel the Bolsheviks intensified their atheist propaganda and education, and their violent struggle against religion. In response to the enforced collectivization of the late 1920s and early 1930s, Chechnya and Ingushetia became the site of a series of rebellions in which some *virid* members played a role. These uprisings were crushed by Soviet forces.<sup>16</sup> Later, during Stalin’s terror of 1937-1938 almost all persons in leading functions of Soviet Checheno-Ingushetia were arrested and killed, from the political elite down to the chairpersons of village councils and collective farms, ordinary party members, and local imams. Yet by 1940 the Soviet leadership still estimated that there were some 10.000 followers of Kunta-Hajji in the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Republic. They were seen as the backbone of anti-Soviet agitation, and as “bandits”.<sup>17</sup>

After the attack of Nazi Germany in 1941 many Ingush and Chechens fought in the ranks of the Red Army. And yet, in 1944 the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was eliminated, and the Chechens and Ingush were branded as “traitors of the Motherland”, put onto freight trains and deported to Central Asia, above all to Kazakhstan. Even soldiers with high military decorations were removed from their units and sent to exile.<sup>18</sup> 23 February 1944 would later become the Day of Nationwide Memory and Grief for the Victims of Repression, celebrated in Ingushetia and Chechnya but also in Kazakhstan.

### **Deportation**

During the war, next to the Chechens and Ingush also the Germans, Karachays, Kalmyks, Balkars, and Crimean Tatars were subject to total deportation – accounting for around two million persons. In all cases the respective national autonomies were eliminated.<sup>19</sup> The exact

---

<sup>16</sup> Jeronim Perović, *From Conquest to Deportation: the North Caucasus under Russian Rule* (London: Hurst, 2018), 236-248.

<sup>17</sup> Perović, *From Conquest to Deportation*, 261.

<sup>18</sup> Perović, *From Conquest to Deportation*, 277.

<sup>19</sup> Other deportations of 1944 targeted for example the Meskhetian Turks and Hemshins from Georgia, and the Greeks from Crimea.

number of the deported Chechens and Ingush is difficult to establish. According to Musagalieva and Musabekova, who studied several archives in Kazakhstan and Russia related to Chechen and Ingush deportees, on 21 March 1944 – that is, shortly after their deportation – the number of Chechens and Ingush brought to the Kazakh and Kirgiz Soviet Socialist Republics amounted to 494.456. Most of them ended up in Kazakhstan, where 147 special trains arrived with a total of 405.941 persons on board.<sup>20</sup>

Many perished during the long transport or shortly after arrival; a conservative estimate is that after the first year of their deportation, around 15% of the Ingush and Chechens had passed away.<sup>21</sup> On the spot the deported encountered a cold winter with no amenities, and were forced to work on local kolkhoz farms. In the 1980s, Minat Aidamirovna Plieva, at that time 82 years old, reported to her granddaughter Makka:

“When we arrived at the point of destination, the Kazakhs and people of other nationalities looked at us in anguish, because the local authorities had convinced them that the people who were brought to them were criminals of the state and famous as cannibals. Me and my children were taken into a local family, because they saw that the children were still small and I had no husband. Later, when they had already come to know us better, they told us that they had been afraid of accepting a complete family for fear of being killed by grown-up men.”<sup>22</sup>

As historian Michaela Pohl argues, such rumors were spread by the NKVD secret police before the arrival of the deportees.<sup>23</sup> Still, a part of the local population, especially Kazakhs who themselves suffered from many hardships, felt compassion for their fellow-Muslims and helped them, as far as that was possible, to survive the psychological pressure and the harsh climate.

An additional problem was that the deported groups were settled far away from each other; as the freight trains with the deported communities passed through Kazakhstan, people were dropped at various junctions, and distributed over the local kolkhozes and industrial units where they were supposed to work. As the Ingush historian and publicist Visin-Girei Kh. Tankiev wrote, “this [dispersal] made it easier to administer and control them, and to exert violence against the people. It was easier to extinguish all national and ethnic forms of identity: the

---

<sup>20</sup> A.S. Musagalieva, R.M. Musabekova, “Deportatsiia i sud’by spetspereselenentsev iz Severnogo Kavkaza (po materialam arkhivov Akmolinskoi i Kokchetavskoi oblastei)”, *Vestnik Ingushskogo nauchno-issledovatel’skogo instituta gumanitarnykh nauk im. Ch.E. Akhrieva* 1 (2017), 26-36.

<sup>21</sup> Scarborough, “An Unwanted Dependence”, 97 (on the basis of Soviet documentation). Other scholars give higher percentages.

<sup>22</sup> These accounts were given in Gamurzievo, Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic.

<sup>23</sup> Pohl, “It Cannot Be that Our Graves Will be Here”, 406.



language, culture and spirituality, and to turn them into slaves that cannot speak – into Mankurts. They were not allowed to meet each other freely and to develop their culture.”<sup>24</sup>.

Even when they knew that family members and friends lived in the neighboring village they were not allowed to visit them.

During fieldwork in 2020 one informant – R.A., born in 1928 – reported that when deportation started in February 1944, she happened to stay at the house of relatives, with the consequence that she was deported together with that family. After a while she learned that her parents lived in a neighboring village; in order not to endanger the life of the male family members with whom she had been deported she decided to go to her parents on her own, alone. She did not know that unauthorized departure from her village would be punished. She was arrested and sentenced to exile in another part of the country, far from all family, for 25 years.<sup>25</sup> Similar stories were reported by many respondents.

The special regime was meant to foster distrust and to prevent integration. According to one source, “instructions were hanging in the police offices, giving a list of limitations for *spetspereselentsy*: it was not allowed to admit them to the Party, and to accept them into institutions of higher education; they were to be used for unskilled labor only; it was not allowed to promote them to positions of authority; to assign them with any kind of social work [in the Komsomol or other organizations]; to allow them submitting initiatives; to give them any kind of rewards or diploma; they were not to be drawn into the army.”<sup>26</sup> The repressive measures were softened after Stalin’s death in 1953; yet only from 1957 were the Chechens and Ingush allowed to return to their homelands, but the process remained difficult and continued until 1963.<sup>27</sup>

### **The Qadiriyya (Kunta-Hajji) *virids* in Kazakhstan**

In spite of their difficult situation during exile, the Ingush and Chechens managed to maintain their important ethnic markers and religious traditions. This is all the more remarkable as before

---

<sup>24</sup> Visin-Girei Kh. Tankiev, “K voprosu o zhizni ingushei v pervye gody deportatsii (1944 g.)”, in: *75 let deportatsii ingushskogo Naroda (1944-1957 gg.): sbornik nauchnykh statei*, ed. by V.-G.Kh. Tankiev (Magas: Iuzhnyi izdatel’skii dom, 2019), 166-173 (here: 170). The Mankurt metaphor of an unthinking slave comes from Dzhingiz Aitmatov’s novel *The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years* (1980).

<sup>25</sup> Fieldwork Nazranovskii rayon of Republic of Ingushetia, August 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Aza Bazorkina, “Terpenie”, in *Tak eto bylo: natsional’nye repressii v SSSR. 1919-1952*, ed. Svetlana U. Alieva (Moscow: Insan, 1993), 116 [p. 320 in the online version]

<sup>27</sup> The official census of 1959 still reported 47.867 Ingush and 130.232 Chechens as residing in Kazakhstan.

deportation, Chechens and Ingush were subject to much Soviet pressure and repression, with the result that the Sufi rituals had already ceased to be widespread; the loud *zikr* was considered illegal. On the whole, however, people maintained their adherence to particular *virids*; and in exile, this adherence made a significant contribution to the preservation of their ethno-cultural identity.

As Galina Khizrieva argued, “it was in exile that the feeling grew that ‘we’ are first of all Muslims, but ‘different’ from the local Kazakh population. The Kazakhs were impressed to see [Chechens and Ingush] perform their religious rituals while they themselves were not allowed to do so. This strengthened the self-respect of the deported, and it also improved the social climate in the host environment around them.”<sup>28</sup>

In their (self-)isolation, the Ingush and Chechen *virids* became a specific phenomenon of Islam in Soviet Kazakhstan. No one could break them – neither the *komendanty* of the NKVD/MVD<sup>29</sup> who controlled their settlements, nor the leaders of the economic units to which they were assigned, and also not the colleagues who tried to dissuade them from performing religious rituals in order to avoid punishment. The belief in Allah and in their shaykhs gave them the strength to withstand these forms of pressure.

Informants who survived the deportation reported that in the first period the followers of Kunta-Hajji performed their vocal *zikr* ceremonies in primitive cells in the ground (Russian, *zemlianki*) where there were no windows and no ventilation. From these underground cells they only came out to support their families or to bury those who passed away. Death was omnipresent, and the *zikr* was part of the mourning.<sup>30</sup>

As one informant, G.M. (b. 1938), reported in 2004:

“I was ten when my elder brother died. Father had already perished in the war. We were five children in the family – three sisters and two brothers. In exile our elder brother died, and materially and morally we were in a very bad situation. There was no money to bury him, and no cloth for a shroud to cover him. When our neighbors heard of our loss they collected everything they could so that my mother could indeed bury her son. We were most impressed when some

---

<sup>28</sup> Galina A. Khizrieva, “Sotsial’naia organizatsiia musul’manskikh obshchin virdovykh bratstv tarikata Kadiria v svete issledovaniia nekropolei Ingushetii”, *Islam v Evrope i Rossii* (Moscow: Mardzhani, 2009), 134–145 (here: 137).

<sup>29</sup> In 1946 the NKVD (People’s Commissariat of Interior Affairs) in charge of the “special settlers” was renamed Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD).

<sup>30</sup> Also in the North Caucasus it was customary to conduct *zikr* ceremonies at funerals. In the post-WWII period the Soviet authorities did not interfere with these rituals.

followers of Kunta-Hajji came and made some circles of their loud *zīkr* in our barren earth cell. We cried not only from the pain of loss but also from happiness, seeing that even in these harsh regions we were able to observe all necessary norms and bury our brother in the form prescribed by our *virid*.”<sup>31</sup>

Those who acted as spiritual leaders and imams did what they could to support the faith of the people, and to give them strength and consolidate them.<sup>32</sup> They were convinced to act in the spirit of Kunta-Hajji, who is reported to have said: “Never leave one of your brothers in hunger, cold, poverty or humiliation. Overcome the evil by kindness and love. Overcome the greedy by generosity. The one who breaks his promise, overcome him by sincerity. Overcome the unbeliever by faith. Be merciful, modest, and ready to sacrifice yourself.”<sup>33</sup> Stemming from the early 1860s when the communities were equally under threat, these teachings helped the Kunta-Hajji Sufis to maintain their group identity also in Soviet exile.

By performing their collective *zīkr* rituals they risked further punishment. Hiding the *zīkr* meetings was facilitated by the harsh winters in Kazakhstan, when snow covered the earth cells in which many of the deported lived in the first years, and where they met for prayers and *zīkr*s. One adherent of Kunta-Hajji, S.G. (b. 1934), reported:

“During the [first period of] deportation [...] we were too exhausted to make the complete ritual of *zīkr* circles. The constant hunger and the cold made us too weak to make numerous *zīkr* circles. Still, we always made at least three circles. After some years had passed we got into better shape and stronger, and performed the *zīkr* much more often and more intensively. The ritual was more difficult also because the walls were wet from our breathing, and puddles were covering the floor of the earth cell. [...] But we found a solution: we started to cover the floor with hay.”<sup>34</sup>

Informants of the younger generation reported that their grandmothers and grandfathers told them about the unbelievable difficulties that they encountered during deportation; yet they also said that they felt united by religion. In general, women were less subject to control from the side of the authorities, making it easier for small groups to perform the *zīkr* in their dwellings.

---

<sup>31</sup> Fieldwork Nazranovskii rayon, Republic of Ingushetia, 2004.

<sup>32</sup> Petimat Akieva, “Retrospektivnyi vzgliad na razvitie musul'manskoi ummy v Ingushetii”, *Vestnik Ingushskogo nauchno-issledovatel'skogo instituta gumanitarnykh nauk im. Ch. E. Akhrieva* (Nazran), no. 1 (2015), 4-8, here: 5.

<sup>33</sup> Akaev, *Sheikh Kunta-Khadzhi*, 11.

<sup>34</sup> Fieldwork Sunzhenskii rayon, Republic of Ingushetia, 2016.

Also, female zikr ceremonies involve smaller groups than male zikrs, and are less intense and noisy.<sup>35</sup>

Soviet Kazakhstan had very few “registered” imams (“servants of the cult” in Soviet parlance) who worked at the few “official” mosque communities with state registration. The population often relied on “non-registered” religious specialists, that is, imams who worked outside of the purview of the state. That could be even in settlements where there existed an “official” mosque. Recent literature has pointed out the relations between licensed and non-licensed imams, and the cooperation and division of labor that sometimes existed between these circles, even in the Kazakhstan of the 1940s.<sup>36</sup> On the whole, however, the authorities tried to curb the influence of these, as they called them, “wandering mullas”.

Non-licensed imams were important among the Ingush and Chechens, and the Soviet organs had difficulties in tracking them down. After all, the life-cycle rituals that they performed were central to the religious identity of Muslims in Kazakhstan. As the Kazakhstani historian Zauresh Saktaganova wrote, “when the authorities identified around ten ‘wandering mullas’ in Karaganda in 1946, six of these had the Chechen nationality. [...] Between 25 June and 16 December 1948 sixteen more ‘wandering mullas’ were found in Karaganda oblast. The *upolnomochennyi* [i.e., the regional officer of the Council for Affairs of Religious Cults, established in 1944] got involved, and the Chechen mullas Sahib, Sulayman and Solomon-Khatu as well as four Kazakh mullas had to cease their activities [as Islamic experts]. These mullas conducted the following rituals: ‘janaza’ (burial), name-giving, ‘nikah’<sup>37</sup> (wedding), and others. The organs in charge [of religious affairs] tried to stop the ritual of circumcision, which is [for males] a basic condition for being Muslim. The *upolnomochennyi* for Karaganda oblast said: ‘It is impossible to lead the fight against circumcision, because it is conducted in anonymity. If you find a family where the circumcision ritual was conducted they will never tell you the name of the mulla’”.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Makka S.-G. Albogachieva, “Zhenskie sufiiskie praktiki gromkogo zikra v Ingushetii”, *Islam v sovremennom mire: vnutrigosudarstvennyi i mezhdunarodno-politicheskii aspekty* vol. 14, no. 2 (2018), 149–164, here: 152.

<sup>36</sup> Eren Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia, 1943-1991* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 181-190 (though without reference to Chechen or Ingush “unregistered” imams or shaykhs).

<sup>37</sup> In the Russian original spelled as “neke”.

<sup>38</sup> Zauresh G. Saktaganova, “Islam v povsednevnoi zhizni Tsentral’nogo Kazakhstana v 1940-kh gg.”, in: *Reformy v povsednevnoi zhizni naseleniia Rossii: istoriia i sovremennost’*. *Materialy mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferentsii, Sankt Peterburg, 02-04 aprelia 2020 goda*, ed. V.A. Veremenko, B.N. Shaidurov, vol. 3 (St. Petersburg: LGU im. A.S. Pushkina, 2020), 250-254, here: 253.

In a document from 1946, produced by a certain V. Liapunov, we find a broader characterization of how Chechens practiced Islam in North Kazakhstan oblast’:

“The Chechen Muslims do not have special prayer houses [as we know them from other communities], with a constant number of visitors and regular services. Rather, on the big feast days of Ramadan and Bayram the namaz prayers are conducted under the open sky. The Friday prayers are done in various houses, depending on the situation. The prescribed religious duties are always performed. The Muslim Chechens have their centers of religious activity in the settlements where their mullas reside. I know of four of such centers: 1) Bishkul’ in Petropavlovsk rayon, with Mulla Hasan Zurabov; 2) Troikoe in Presnovskii [rayon], with Mulla Bitersultan Abzotov; 3) Uspenka in Bulaevskii rayon, with Mulla Hamid Abdrahmanov; 4) Kiialy of Sovetskii rayon, with Mulla Sa’id Apolonkaev. All of these mullas enjoy an outstanding prestige among the population. What they propose is regarded as final; and their propositions are not limited to matters of teaching.”<sup>39</sup>

We can assume that these “mullas” in their “centers” of 1946 also used to conduct Sufi ceremonies. This situation continued: as Zharas Ermekbaev noted, in the Akmolinsk district of northern Kazakhstan alone twenty Sufi groups were reported in 1955, in the first place from the Naqshbandiyya and Qadiriyya brotherhoods.<sup>40</sup>

While informants emphasize that the rituals remained unchanged during the time of deportation, one new *virid* of the Kunta-Hajji cluster came into being in 1947-48, in the town of Atbasar of Akmolinsk oblast’ (west of today’s Astana); it then established itself in another village of the same area, Krasnaia Poliana. This new group was led by the Chechen shaykh Vis-Hajji Zagiev (? – 1973); accordingly, this *virid* became known as the Vis-Hajjis (*vis-khadzhintsy*).<sup>41</sup> Zagiev’s spiritual leader had been Chim-Mirza Taumerzaev (1866-1923) from Mairtup in Chechnya, one of Kunta-Hajji’s *murids* who was known in particular for his piety and care for the poor, and for a particular strong ethos of labor.<sup>42</sup> Chim-Mirza Taumerzaev’s *virid* was composed of people from the poorest part of society, and was characterized by a strong

<sup>39</sup> Central State Archive of the Republic Kazakhstan, F. 1711, opis’ 1, delo 8, folio 4.

<sup>40</sup> Zharas Ermekbaev, “O roli islama v posvednevnoi zhizni ingushei v Kazakhstane”, in: *Islam v Rossii i za ee predelami: istoriia, obshchestvo, kul’tura. Sbornik materialov mezhrainnoi konferentsii, posviashchennoi 100-letiiu so dnia konchiny vydaiushchegosia religioznogo deiatelia sheikh Batal-khadzhi Belkharoeva*, ed. M.S.-G. Albogachieva (Magas: Muzei antropologii i etnografii i. Petra Velikogo [Kunstkamera] RAN, 2011), 459-465.

<sup>41</sup> Vachagaev, *Sheikhi i ziiaraty Chechni*, 64-65.

<sup>42</sup> On the emergence of the Vis-Hajjis see also Mikhail Roshchin (with Dzhulietta Meskhidze), “Islam v Chechne”, *Rossiiia i musul’anskii mir* 2004, no. 1, 33-45, here: 38-39.

sense of unity. In exile, Taumerzaev's disciple Vis-Hajji Zagiev continued this tradition of support for the poor and the desolated. He attracted Chechens from all corners of Kazakhstan who hoped to attain his help. In terms of religious ritual Vis-Hajji was the first to perform *zikrs* where men and women would participate together. His group also stood out from other *virids* by their wearing of white caps. As Michaela Pohl reported on the basis of interviews, Vis-Hajji was "credited with having visions and being able to speak with angels and the deceased."<sup>43</sup> His tomb near Krasnaia Poliana is a site of veneration.<sup>44</sup>

Vis-Hajji's followers were known as very responsible, pious and hard-working people who attained the respect of the local authorities. They lived among themselves, and as Vis-Hajji Zagiev was on good terms with the directors of the respective *kolkhoz* farm they could also perform their *zikr* in public. After Stalin's death a few of his *murids* returned to Chechnya, but most members of the Vis-Hajji *virid* remained in Central Asia, where they are still residing at one place, Krasnaia Poliana in northern Kazakhstan.

Today this village has a mono-ethnic population of more than 1.000 Chechens, all attributing themselves to Vis-Hajji's *virid*. They meticulously follow their shaykh's regulations. During their regular *zikrs* they employ a musical instrument that reminds of a tambourine (which is called *jirghe* in Chechen), and another national instrument that resembles a violine. Women still take part in their rituals, in spite of the opinion of orthodox Muslims that women should not participate in *zikrs*, and even less so together with men. Vis-Hajjis defend their practice by arguing that there is mutual respect among all participants in the ritual. They argue that any *zikr* dancer must imagine that before him in the circle goes the Prophet Muhammad, and after him Abu Bakr as-Siddiq, the first caliph (successor) of Muhammad. This principle is guiding in all *zikr* sessions, irrespective of whether women take part or not. And most of the time women are positioned in the *zikr* line between their fathers and brothers, or between other close relatives, in order to make them feel at ease; this allows women to feel the spiritual unity and to fully concentrate on the ritual.<sup>45</sup> **At the same time we have not encountered any reports about women who might have been perceived as religious authorities in their own rights.**

In contrast to the self-isolation of the Vis-Hajji *virid*, the other *virids* of the Kunta-Hajji cluster – and in particular the Kunta-Hajji *virid* proper – have the capacity to absorb persons of

---

<sup>43</sup> Pohl, "It Cannot Be that Our Graves Will be Here", 416.

<sup>44</sup> Pohl, "It Cannot Be that Our Graves Will be Here", 417. Cf. Vachagaev, *Sheikhi i ziiaraty Chechni*, 121.

<sup>45</sup> Fieldwork village of Krasnaia Poliana, Kazakhstan, September 2022. The informant was Ansar Ibaev, b. 1963.

non-Vainakh ethnic background, especially Kazakhs, Uzbeks and Kyrgyz. People are drawn into the *virid* after having seen their friends and acquaintances performing the *zikr*; gradually they familiarized themselves with the spiritual foundations of the brotherhood, took themselves part in the *zikr* and eventually became followers.<sup>46</sup>

This capacity to integrate has to do with what appears as very flat hierarchies. New members join by simply making the vow to follow the path prescribed by the *virid*'s founding shaykh, that is, a person of the past. Other than in most Sufi brotherhoods, the contemporary followers of the Kunta-Hajji *virids* in the North Caucasus and Kazakhstan do not understand themselves as links in the chain of transmission (*silsila*), because they did not receive an oral or written permission (*ijaza*) from a living shaykh (or master, *murshid*); in Ingushetia and Chechnya, there are no living shaykhs. As a consequence, the contemporary *virid* members see themselves as followers of the namesakes of their *virids*, that is, of masters who deceased many decades ago. They follow their *virids*' rules and regulations as they have come down to them from their predecessors, mostly in the form of oral narratives. Still, they see themselves as *murids* (adepts/followers) of their deceased masters in the same way as members of other brotherhoods in the Caucasus follow living masters. This practice is one of the peculiarities of the Chechen and Ingush Qadiriyya branches; most other brotherhoods insist that a newcomer must be initiated by a living shaykh to be able to enter the group, and must receive a license (*ijaza*) from a living shaykh in order to become a shaykh in his own right. This practice is absent among the Chechen and Ingush *virids*.

The absence of living shaykhs does not preclude the integration of new members; in fact, in our days anybody who wishes to accept the *virid* can do so. By vowing to fulfill all prescriptions of a given *virid* (in the sense of the “tasks” and “litanies” formulated by the founding shaykh of the past) a new person can enter the group; this also includes the possibility to switch from one *virid* to another. Today it is the mosque imams and the officers of Kazakhstan's Muftiate (where one of the Mufti's closest advisors is a Chechen, Muhammad Husein Alsabekov).<sup>47</sup> The muftiate's imams have the right to guide persons into a *virid* (in the sense of “group”) by giving them the *virid* (in the sense of “tasks/litanies”).

---

<sup>46</sup> Fieldwork city of Kaskelen; the informant is A.I. Sultyrov, b. 1965.

<sup>47</sup> Alsabekov was formerly mufti of Ichkeria. See “25 let sluzheniia Islamu zamestitelia muftiia Mukhammad Khusaina Alsabekova otmetili v Kazakhstane”, *Islam v SNG*, 11 Dec. 2012, at <http://islamsng.com/kaz/5842>

An outsider will not easily identify a person as belonging to this or that *virid*. Affiliations become apparent only when after the general daily *namaz* prayer the believers start to recite the specific *virid* tasks that have come down to them from their masters. Preserved in oral form, these texts have a highly normative character, and *virid* members try to carry them out in a highly regulated manner.

For its members the *virid* also regulates questions related to the *qalim* and to presents that a groom has to hand over to his bride before wedding, but also issues related to the *movlid* (*mawlid*) celebrations (which are usually not accompanied by a *zikr*, unless the participants decide to conduct one). Followers of the *virids* insist that they take into consideration the changing historical circumstances; only the ritual practice of the *zikr* is not subject to any change and must be continued in the form that it was conducted in the lifetime of their respective founding shaykh. This tradition is purely oral; the few written texts of the Kunta-Hajji tradition (such as the above-mentioned treatise that Kunta-Hajji dictated to one of his disciples while in Russian exile) do not include regulations of how to conduct the *zikr*.

### **The *zikr* ritual**

What follows is a description based on the *zikr* of the Kunta-Hajji *virid* within the Kunta-Hajji cluster, that is, the *virid* that did not adopt the name of one of Kunta-Hajji's major disciples. It is still regarded as the largest of the *virids*.

The *zikr* ceremony is prepared by the *tkhamada*, that is, the elder of the *murids*; he organizes the meeting and takes care of provisions. Before the *zikr* the imam of the mosque sits down at the *mihrab* (the niche in the mosque wall that indicates the prayer direction, *qibla*) and narrates an episode from the life of the prophet Muhammad, the latter's companions or some famous Sufi shaykhs. With clear voice he speaks to his audience about the testaments given by shaykh Kunta-Hajji Kishiev and about the specifics of his *zikr*. Usually such narrations are meant to prepare the participants of the ritual for the *zikr*. If the *zikr* is conducted at a private home (and many houses do have a special room for such meetings), then the *murids* sit down along the walls. If the *zikr* is part of a funeral then it starts right after the *janaza* prayer.

The next step is that one of the participants performs religious chants that include the praise of Allah as well as of the prophet Muhammad and Kunta-Hajji. The men are sitting in the circle and start to swing according to the rhythm given by the voice of the performer of the chants. As the chants speed up also their movements accelerate; while still sitting, their bodies swing left and right. Gradually the tone of the voice becomes stronger. The *tkhamada*



pronounces *La ilaha illa Llah* (Arabic: “there is no god but God”) in a slow and prolonged manner, with all participants repeating this slogan and clapping their hands, still swinging left and right at the places where they are sitting. Then the young participants stand up and, forming a circle, start a slow movement, rhythmically clapping their hands.

In this collective dance they stamp with the right foot. The movement of the circle gradually accelerates while the participants rhythmically repeat the words *Allahu akbar* (“God is great”). Then all who want to participate in the vocal *zikr* can join in. The *murids* are standing close to another, forming a circle. The idea is that the space within the circle becomes a sacred place to which God’s mercy comes down. The audience around the circle supports the rhythm by directing loud applauses at the *zikr* participants.

While the *tkhamada* remains beyond the circle, his assistant, the *turkh*, is part of the chain of dancers; his task is to control the activities of the *murids*, and to make sure the movements and actions unfold in the correct sequence. He also sees to it that beginners or exhausted *murids* do not violate the *zikr* rhythm. After all, the *zikr* can last for hours. In case the *turkh* himself gets exhausted he exits the circle; the *tkhamada* then touches the shoulder of another *murid*, signaling him that he is the new *turkh* who must guide the *zikr*.<sup>48</sup> The *murids* perform the circle *zikr* first in the clockwise direction, but after seven or eight circles they turn around and move in the opposite direction. While moving they pay special attention to their breathing technique.

Details can vary according to the choices of Kunta-Hajji’s disciples who, after the master’s disappearance, created the variations that characterize the respective *virids* of the Kunta-Hajji cluster today. Some started to use musical instruments, like the above-mentioned tambourines and violines. Others added particular movements to the *zikr* ritual. In the Bammategirey *virid*, *zikr* participants throw their heads back and forth during the ritual, all the while they jump on the spot, from one foot onto the other, all the while chanting the formula of *tawhid* (God’s unity), “*La ilaha illa Llah*”. In this *virid* women conduct the *zikr* in separation from men.

The adherents of Batal-Hajji perform the vocal *zikr* in the circle while swinging rhythmically, standing on the left and right feet in alternations, clapping their hands and repeating the *La ilaha illa Llah* or religious hymns (Arabic *nazm*, in Ingush: *nazim*). Their *zikr* is shorter than that of the Kunta-Hajjis, and women are not allowed to perform *zikrs*.

The *virid* of Husayn-Hajji Gardanov is less well-known than the others, partly because it tends to remain in seclusion but also because they do not have their own *zikr* “brand”: their ritual

---

<sup>48</sup> Ol’ga S. Pavlova, *Chechenskii etnos segodnia: cherty sotsial’no-psikhologicheskogo portreta* (Moscow: Poligrafist, 2013), 316.

unfolds in the same fashion as the Bammatgirey *virid*, that is, with the participants moving their heads back and forth and jumping from one foot onto the other. The only difference is that in the Gardanov *virid* the *murids* can fall into full ecstasy, which is not done in the other *virids*. Women do not participate in the Gardanov *zikh*.

Mani-Shaykh introduced a periodical swinging of the head, to facilitate a quick entry into trance; otherwise they perform the *zikh* in a similar form as the Bammatgirey *virid*. What is different from the Bammatgireys is that women can participate in the *zikh* but separately from the men.

In the Chim-Mirza *virid* the *zikh* is accompanied by the *jirghe* tambourine, and participants form several circles instead of one. The inner moving circle contains those who play the instrument; the second circle moves into the opposite direction, while the third circle again moves like the inner circle, and the fourth circle like the second. After approximately ten minutes all stand still, and after a short break each circle changes direction, according to the same pattern. Women participate together with men, but most of the time the female participants keep to themselves, forming the outer circle.<sup>49</sup>

While each *virid* defends the exclusive status of its own shaykh, followers of one group also respect the shaykhs of other *virids*. In Kazakhstan, the adherents of any *virid* can participate in the *zikh* of another *virid*, especially when they meet at common events; in that case *murids* do not separate themselves or stand apart from the broader gathering. From the overall Kunta-Hajji cluster, the largest *virid* in Kazakhstan is the Kunta-Hajji *virid* proper, that is the one that did not take a new founding shaykh into its name. The second *virid* in terms of numbers is that of Vis-Hajji Zagiev. The other *virids* are represented by smaller groups of *murids* that often live in various parts of Kazakhstan, with the result that a *murid* will not always be able to attend the *zikh* in the form that is specific to his or her own *virid*.

Today, the Kunta-Hajji *virids* of the Qadiriyya brotherhood enter the public not only with their *zikrs* and their funeral and memorial rituals. Rather, they are a legitimate part of Kazakh society. Ingush and Chechens perform the hajj to Mecca and Medina within the quota system that Kazakhstan receives each year. Just like other Muslims of the country, Chechens and Ingush also initiate the construction of mosques and collect donations for this purpose. According to data collected by Zharas Ermekbaev, the second largest mosque of Almaty was built with the support of the Ingush Akhmet Mestoev and other Vainakh sponsors; opened in 2002, it has minarets in the form of the traditional mountain family towers of the Ingush. The construction of

---

<sup>49</sup> Albogachieva, “Kunta-khadzhi Kishiev, ego propoved’ i posledovateli”, 101-107.

a mosque in the city of Issyk (Almaty oblast') was financed by another Ingush, Ibragim Arsamkov; it opened in June 2010. And in the capital Astana Ingush and Chechens established a mosque named after Kunta-Hajji Kishiev (2011).<sup>50</sup> There is a Vainakh association, and Chechens and Ingush are represented in Kazakhstan's People Assembly.<sup>51</sup>

The Vainakh *virids* also participate in the public events of 23 February, the Day of Memory and Grief reminding of the 1944 deportation. On that day the *virids* perform vocal *zikrs* and *movlids*, and organize humanitarian help. Kazakhstan's leadership supports these initiatives.<sup>52</sup>

### Conclusion

There can be no doubt that reports about the resilience of Sufi practices have much to do with the quest for honor and self-respect in a highly humiliating and violent environment. Judging from the informants' narratives, religion became the most important refuge for the survivors of the deportation. Islam provided hope (in survival, return, and in the afterlife) as well as consolation (in the face of the terrible losses), especially in the first years after deportation. Perhaps more than ever, belief and survival of the Ingush and Chechens was linked to the *virids* of the Kunta-Hajji cluster. As our informants related, they were the major – if not the only – structure for mutual support among the Chechens and Ingush, and they had a very significant function for preserving Chechen and Ingush identity under the horrible conditions of deportation. We found no evidence of Chechens or Ingush who might have joined Kazakh or Uzbek Sufi groups at their places of exile.<sup>53</sup>

The vocal *zikr* ceremonies were the most palpable facet of this identity. In how far they should be interpreted as a spiritual “escape” from the horror of the special settlements is difficult to establish. While the *zikrs* were by necessity “loud”, there were ways to hide them from the

---

<sup>50</sup> Ermekbaev, “O roli islama”.

<sup>51</sup> For this official representation see Birgit Brauer, “Chechens and the Survival of Their Cultural Identity in Exile”, *Journal of Genocide Research* 4.3 (2002), 387–400.

<sup>52</sup> Assambleia Naroda Kazakhstanana, “Deportatsiia narodov Kavkaza: vyzhit' pomogli kazakhi”, 23 February 2021, <https://assembly.kz/ru/news/deportatsiya-narodov-kavkaza-vyzhit-pomogli-kazakhi/>; “Pamiat' khranit vse – Akhmed Muradov”, 23 February 2023, at <https://assembly.kz/ru/news/pamyat-khranit-vse-ahmed-muradov/>. On Chechen image-making in Kazakhstan see Beate Eschment, “The Chechens and Kurds of Kazakhstan between Historical and Second Homelands”, *Central Asian Affairs* 8 (2021), 346–371, here: 353.

<sup>53</sup> Some Uzbek and Kazakh Sufi groups also practiced the ‘loud’ dhikr, albeit in other forms; see Bakhtiiar Babadzhanov, “Zikr dzhakhr u bratstv Tsentral'noi Azii: diskussii, tipologii, vozrozhdenie”, *Pax Islamica* 1 (2) 2009, 105–125 (albeit without reference to Chechen/Ingush Sufi groups).

eyes of the controlling organs: they needed no special structure, no inventory, and could be performed almost anywhere, involving small or large amounts of persons. And while they might appear as “wild” and “ecstatic”, they follow strict rules and procedures, to the point that small variations become the greatest markers of specific *virid* identities.

It appears to us that under the conditions of deportation and exile, the “shaykh-less” state of the *virids* – the absence of living grandmasters who in other Sufi brotherhood lead the organization and monopolize authority in it – turned out to be an advantage; the organization of the rituals did not depend on the presence of identifiable authorities but could be started at grassroot levels by ordinary followers. These practitioners would be able to take into account the respective circumstances (for instance by reducing the number of circles if people were too exhausted by hunger). The oral transmission of the *virid* (in the sense of litany/prayer) was identical to the initiation into the *virid* as a group. Perhaps this easy access to the *virid* also allowed the Sufi groups to combine members of various clans and extended families, thereby mitigating both the division by bloodlines and the dispersed character of the deportation settlements across Kazakhstan. In later years (and in particular after 1957), the authorities certainly became more lenient towards Vainakh *zikr* activities which they could not fully suppress anyway. This is reflected in oral accounts that emphasize aspects of accommodation instead of victimhood.

While the testimonies from the diaspora emphasize the stability of the *virid* rituals, the emergence of the Vis-Hajji group demonstrates that the initial patterns “imported” from the North Caucasus to Kazakhstan could be changed, not only with regard to the ritual itself (the integration of mixed *zikrs* and of a tambourine or violine) but also in terms of shaykh-hood, with Vis-Hajji Zagiev emerging as a new contemporary master; after his passing away in 1973, however, no new shaykh appeared. At the same time his group, more than others, survived thanks to its close-knit structure and self-isolation – which, it seems, allowed to limit state interference and preserved the unity of the group vis-à-vis the broader public in Kazakhstan.