

Russia

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The Northernmost Outpost of Islamic Civilization

According to certain legends still very much alive today in the local collective memory, the first Muslim missionaries came to the territory of Western Siberia and began to disseminate the true belief in Allah among locals in 1394-1395. Today, amidst conditions of burgeoning ethnic, cultural and religious self-awareness of the citizens of Russia, this legend has taken on the character of a genuine historical fact. The Siberian cities of Omsk and Tyumen – centres of dense Siberian Muslim populations – celebrated the 600th anniversary of Siberian Islam as national and religious holidays, which were accompanied by festivals of traditional culture and scientific conferences.

Islam is the official religion of an overwhelming majority of Turkic language speakers living in the south of Western Siberia. More specifically, this population professes Sunnism. There are three large Muslim ethnic groups in the Siberian region: Siberian Tartars (over 180,000 persons), Western Siberian Kazakhs (over 160,000), and the Volga-Ural Tartars (60,000 persons). Siberian Islam draws its historical significance from the fact that it constitutes the northernmost outpost of Islamic civilization in the world. Siberian Muslims are compactly settled in national villages (Aul, Jurt) and also live in large cities together with representatives of various nationalities such as: Russian, Ukrainian, German, Latvian, and Estonian. The national culture of Tartars and Kazakhs has been preserved in villages. It is thus still possible to observe traditional modes of cattle breeding, hunting, fishing, as well as traditional dwellings, food, clothing, and art. Almost every Tartar and Kazakh settlement has a mosque and Muslim priest – *mullah*. Western Siberia is an example of the peaceful coexistence of different cultures and religious systems: Orthodoxy, Protestantism, and Islam.

Islam entered the Siberian Khanate as an official religion in the 1570s, the time of Khan Kuchum. Archaeological findings testify that subjects of Islam in Western Siberia in the 17th and 18th centuries are practically non-existent. It is probable that Islamic ideas did not spread among the population groups in this period. However, in the mid-19th century a legend was recorded which stated that in 797 of the Muslim Era (1394-1395 AD), 366 horse-riding sheikhs and their ally Sheibani-Khan, together with 1,700 soldiers, arrived on the banks of the Irtysh

River. There they fought a great battle to spread the Islamic faith to the Siberian inhabitants, consisting in the Khotan, Karakypcjak, and Nogaj. The Muslim missionaries coming to Siberia were said to be disciples of the mystic Hadji Baha ad-Din Naqshband (1318–1389).

Another version of this legend, still alive in the national memory of Siberian Tartars, holds that all 366 sheikhs were treacherously killed and then buried by disciples in special sacred cemeteries – *ostana*. Some modern surnames of Siberian Tartars and names of their settlements stem from the word sheikh (preacher), such as the surname Shihkov, and the village Shykhcha. All groups of Siberian Tartars have legends of old religious wars, during which Muslim missionaries destroyed old idols – *qurchak* (dolls). These legends are found in relation to information about the Naqshbandi Sufi order, one of the most widespread Sufi brotherhoods in the 15th century. The Naqshbandi order was characterized by a high degree of socio-political activity. The members of the order played an important role in the final establishment of Islam in Central Asia and East Turkestan, as well as among Kirghiz and Kazakh tribes. Intervening in secular authority and contact with the various political circles form the most important postulate of this brotherhood.

Surely, the dissemination of Islam was a very long, inconsistent and tragic process, and undoubtedly cannot be reduced to any one legendary event or historical episode. However, the spread of Islam among Siberian Tartars and Kazakhs meant important changes in their political and ethnic structure. The nucleus of the Kazakh people was formed in the 15th and 16th centuries within

the framework of the Kazakh Khanate. The Siberian Khanate was transformed into an independent state in the second half of the 16th century, a period which saw the beginning of Tartar's ethnic groups. The distribution of Islam was the external expression of these social and ethnic processes. For example, the forming of Baraba Tartars (one of the ethnic groups of Siberian Tartars) occurred in the 17th and early 18th centuries. Baraba Tartars practised shamanism in the beginning of the 18th century. However, already by the mid-18th century, Islam had spread extraordinarily quickly among this group. Interestingly, the Chulym Turks (a small group of Turkic-language speakers, surrounded by Muslim and Christian populations) have maintained shamanism as the main form of religious practice, not superseded by Christianity or Islam.

The dissemination of Islam promoted the establishment of a basis of Muslim culture among Siberian Tartars and Kazakhs: The norms of Muslim justice and morals, Muslim rituals and holidays, and even Muslim names became tradition for these peoples. Muslim schools were founded to offer education to the Kazakhs and Tartars, and to acquaint them with Arabic and Persian languages. Furthermore, mosques were built in Siberian cities and villages.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the terror Stalin exerted upon the Tartar and Kazakh peoples was directed especially against the Islamic preachers. It is interesting to note here that the people of Siberia were long acquainted with the regional religions up to the spread of Islam. The medieval Central Asian state associations – the Old Turkic Khanate I and II (552–630 and 682–745), the Uygurian Khanate (745–840) and the state of Yeniseien Kyrghyzs (6th–13th centuries) – all played an important role in the history of these peoples. Shamanism served as the ideological basis of the Old Turkic Khanates. Manichaeism, however, was the official religion within the frameworks of the Uygurian confederation of the peoples of Central Asia and Southern Siberia, and then among the ancient Kyrghyzs. Manichaeism constitutes a religious-philosophical system, based on a synthesis of Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Christianity. Thus, the peoples of Siberia had experience in interacting with ancient religious systems and with the world religions. This experience is reflected in the ethnographies of Siberian Muslims.

But shamanism has left the greatest mark on Siberian Muslim culture. For example, the term *tengre* (meaning God, deity) has been maintained among Kazakhs and almost all groups of Siberian Tartars. The same word meant 'supreme deity' in the Old Turkic epoch and in modern times it has spread among the followers of shamanism in the Sajon-Altai region. Other deities and spirits known to Siberian Tartars and Kazakhs (*jer-su*, Earth/water, *umaj*, *qut*, *natigaj*), were considered sacred by Medieval shamanist-Turks and Mongolians as well. The

traces of a fire cult, preserved among the Kazakhs and Tartars, can be explained by the influence of Middle Asian cultures. The word *Qudai* (*Huudai*), signifying God, is Persian in origin and is known to Western Siberian Muslims and Sajon-Altai shamanists. Animistic beliefs are also connected with the ancient shamanic beliefs. They are expressed in the form of hunting-fishing cults of the spirits (*ijasy*, *ese*): the spirits of the water (*su ijasy*), the forest (*picin*, *pichin*, *urman-isasy*), houses (*oj ijasy*), fire (*ot ijasy*) and others.

Shamanistic beliefs were preserved to the greatest extent by Baraba Tartars. Ethnographic sources at the end of the 17th–early 18th centuries, offer detailed descriptions of Baraba shamans (*kam*), shamanic practice, attributes of a shamanic cult, and shamanic rituals and customs.

Shamanistic notions penetrate the whole complex of Siberian Tartar's spirit culture. For example, Siberian Tartars' burial buildings comprise frames (*kirtme*, *sukky*, *oj*) and poles (*bagan*, *orma*), which have deep and very ancient analogies among the non-Islamic peoples. Poles on graves symbolize the 'world tree', connecting in one unit: the universe; the shamanic stairway, used by shamans for contacting the upper spirits; and the sex distinction of buried persons. Frames on graves symbolize the house of the deceased. On the other hand, Islamic features (invitation of *mullah*, non-participation of the women at the burial ritual) are typical for the rituals of Siberian Tartars as well.

The formation of an original Muslim-shamanist syncretism based on the organic synthesis of Islamic and pre-Islamic beliefs and cults of the Turkic-language population of the Western Siberian plain. The strata include not only traces of the early religious forms (e.g. shamanism), but also of relics of pre-Islamic religious systems, which have found expression in the worldviews of these peoples. ♦

Funeral prayer, Siberian Tartars



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