

# The Influence of the Culture of Turkic and Iranian Muslim Peoples on the Origin and Development of the Traditions of the Spiritual Songs of the Tatars

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## 1. Introduction

Tatars are a Turkic ethnic group, professing Islam. Tatars are the second-largest nation in Russia and have an administrative formation called the Republic of Tatarstan. The ancestors of the Tatars are Bulgars, who settled on the banks of the Itil river (today the Volga) in the 8<sup>th</sup> century and formed the state of Volga Bulgaria. The next name of the state in the 15-16<sup>th</sup> centuries was the Kazan Khanate with the administrative center in the city of Kazan, which is now the capital of the Republic of Tatarstan.

The Turkic and Iranian Muslim peoples rendered influence on the formation and development of the culture of the Tatars in ancient times and the middle ages. Islam penetrated the Volga Bulgaria through trade with the countries of Central Asia and the Middle East. It is known that the Bulgarian king Almush wrote a letter to the Arab Caliph Jafar al-Muqtadir with a request to send people to spread and study Islam among the Bulgarian people. In the year 921, a large diplomatic mission was sent from the capital of the Arab Caliphate, Baghdad, to the Northern country with a letter from the Caliph himself. Ahmed Ibn Fadlan was appointed Secretary of the Embassy and left a detailed account of his journey. The Embassy included experts in Muslim law and religious teachers. Their task was to introduce in the Bulgar Kingdom not only Islam but also Muslim traditions.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> N. I. Vorobev and G. M. Khisamutdinov, *Tatars of the Middle Volga and Urals*, (Moscow: Science, 1967), 8.

Islam as a religion in Volga Bulgaria was known even before the arrival of the Baghdad Embassy. However, the official date of adoption of Islam by Volga Bulgaria is 922. With the advent of Islam to the Bulgars, came the classical culture of the civilized East, which marked the medieval culture of the Tatars. This culture was later came to be known as “Kadim Sangat” - “old art” and was fully developed at the courts of the feudal nobility of the Tatar khans. From the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the traditions of this art continued to exist among the Tatar rural intelligentsia, scientists, teachers, and religious scholars, as well as among the Sufis. In most cases, they were people educated in the cultural centers of Muslim countries of the Near and the Middle East.

The musical and cultural traditions of the Tatars were formed under the influence of the Turkic and Iranian Muslim peoples. Spiritual chants or “ilahi” belong to the lyric-epic genre of Tatar traditional musical culture. Among the Tatars, these works have the same names as the Turkic and Iranian Muslim peoples. The *casids*, *munajats*, *zikres* are directly related to the Sufi-dervishes. These works had a classical Eastern rhythm and performed to the accompaniment of traditional musical instruments such as *def*, *tanbur*, *dumbra*.

## 2. Traditions of the Spiritual Songs of the Tatars

We find one of the first mentions of *munajat*, in “The Story of Musa” section of the poem “Nurisodur” (“Rays of Soul”) by the 16<sup>th</sup> century Tatar poet Muhamedyar.<sup>2</sup>

*Munajat* is a lyrical genre of Eastern, including Tatar literature, music, and folklore. It is a conversation about the sacred, an appeal, a plea to Allah for salvation. *Munajats* also refers to the lyric-epic genre of Tatar traditional music culture.<sup>3</sup>

Thematically, *munajat* is a multifaceted phenomenon. It can be divided into four groups - a reflection on life; on the Motherland, or the native land; mother and child; and philosophical problems of life such as death and immortality.

<sup>2</sup> A. H. Sadekova, *Munajats*, (Kazan: Tatar Book Publishing House, 2005), 11.

<sup>3</sup> Sadekova, *Munajats*, 11.

*Bait* is a lyric-epic genre of Tatar folklore, which originated in the period of the Bulgarian state and constantly improved for many centuries, absorbing the best traditions of folklore and written poetry. The subjects of baits can be military-historical, the status of the people, the fate of women, or the struggle for land and freedom. By its general nature, the *baits* of the war years can be divided into two groups: lyric-epic and lyrical.

*Bait* is a folk art form of the Tatar traditional musical culture. They are passed down from generation to generation, absorbing the content of the experiences, thoughts, worries of the ancestors. *Baits* are relevant at the present time, as they sing of the native land, friendship, the need to respect and venerate the religion of the ancestors. The beginning of the special study of *baits* is associated with the name of the great Tatar scientist-encyclopedist and writer Kayum Nasyri (1825 - 1902). Works of the lyric-epic genre of Tatar traditional musical culture had a special place in the life of the Tatar people but experienced severe persecution during the Soviet era.

Gennady Makarov is a scientist-folklorist and a great enthusiast who worked for the revival of Tatar folk song culture and traditional musical instruments. Makarov made a huge contribution in the study of Muslim *baits*, *munajats*, *zikres*, which influences contemporary studies. The scientist refers to religious genres to the Tatar classical medieval heritage and argues that the *Maqam* style of classical music of the Near and Middle East, are more typical, in his opinion, of ancient samples. He collected spiritual songs of the Tatars and presented with musical notation in his book, *Conversations of the Dervishes: Baits, Munajats*.

Along with classical Oriental rhythms and melodies, Tatar spiritual chants were formed under the influence of ancient Volga-Ural Turkic traditions, Tatar pentatonic scale, and acquired their own identity.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Performance of Tatar Spiritual Songs

Under Soviet Union, *baits* and *munajats* were performed secretly and saved in the traditions of home singing. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> G.M. Makarov, *Conversations of the Dervishes: Baits, Munajats*, (Kazan: Tatar Book Publishing House, 2011), 3.

century Tatar spiritual chants gained their former popularity. And now there is a process of their revival, both in an authentic form and in the works of modern Tatar musicians.

The performance of religious genres becomes an indispensable part of the programs of folklore and ethnographic ensembles, whose participants record ancient tunes directly from the carriers of tradition and bring them to the concert stage. Among such groups include Tatar folk ensembles “Bereket”, “Gomga kun”, “Ak kalfak” which emerged in the late nineties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The Tatar folk ensemble of Kazan State Institute of Culture “Gomga kun” (led by A. Enikeeva) was established in the year 2006. The repertoire of the group includes professionally performed samples of oral, musical, and ritual folklore of different ethnic groups of Tatars. The ensemble shares with the audience stories through the stage of ritual performances and vocal compositions of Tatar spiritual songs: *baits*, *zikres*, *munajats*. These works are accompanied by the members of the ensemble on old Tatar musical instruments: such as *dumbra*, *def*, *gizhik*, *kubis*, *sornay*, *kuray*, *tashsibizgi*. Particularly interesting performances are the *munajat* “Rasulem” by the student ensemble Gomga kun and “Bird’s Zikr” by the children ensemble Ak Kalfak.

In the regions of Tatarstan, there are still traditions of the collective performance of spiritual chants by women. Elderly women gather in a house and perform *baits* and *munajats*. Even today, it is a widespread custom in Tatar villages to compose a *bait* for the death of relative. Through *baits*, the authors express their condolences to the family and friends of the deceased. Usually *baits* begin with a Quranic’s phrase, they mention characters from Turkic mythology and the Quran. *Baits* are often performed (read), rewritten, and stored in family archives.

An example of *Bait* is called “Bait of Minneruj apa” (devoted aunt Minneruj), composed in the year of 1988 by Ahmetshina Raila Talibovna (born in the year 1940) from the Kargopol village of Alkeyevsky district of the Republic of Tatarstan. The *bait* is about the bitter life path of an devout elderly woman named Minneruj apa and her tragic death. She drowned in the spring of 1977 in the river at the age of 84. The themes of the *bait* are difficult life path,

lonely old age, and sudden death. *Bait* begins with a typical Quranic phrase:

*I begin my narrative  
from the sacred Bismillah!  
With the pain of your death  
Bait began to write.*

*Ten o'clock in the morning  
You from homes on the river went  
With grief for a long time went,  
While their death is not found.*

*On her head a downy shawl  
Green cloak has put  
When fell off the cliff into the river  
I not die perhaps, thought...*

*When you fell into cold water  
Did you realize you were dying?  
Farewell, bright world, my family!  
I'm dying to say did you?*

*Know, bitter fate  
You were not spared.  
Good thing your dead body  
Not sailed*

*In the night before you died  
I saw you in a dream with a white horse<sup>5</sup>.  
Bless us, dear aunt  
Lie still in your grave!.*

*The bitterness in your life you've seen a lot,  
You were in the trenches in the war,  
And you in your senility,  
Drowned in the water, died.*

*You've been a widow for years,  
All your sins atoned.  
One Allah, angels,  
Waited with faith, met you!*

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<sup>5</sup> White horse in Tatar mythology is a symbol of death.

*My aunt, what happened to you?  
Perhaps, got you dizzy?  
Be enough, come on! I'll take you  
Azrael turned to you.*

*What happened, what happened,  
You can't drown anymore!  
Farewell, be blessed, dear aunt,  
You'll never come back...*

*The name of the ring on the hand,  
Nuriahmet.  
Relatives buried you with honors,  
Many thanks to all of them!*

*With all my heart I wrote,  
Their feelings about your fate,  
Sleep well in your grave  
From we wish you...*

#### **4. Conclusion**

Musical-cultural traditions of Muslims are brought to the ancestors of the Tatar Bulgars by the Turkic and Iranian Muslim peoples of the East. The transfer marked the period of development of the Tatar medieval culture called "Kadym Sengate." Until recently, this period remained a "blank spot" of native scholarship. Currently, there is a tendency towards the revival of the oldest layers of national folklore and the return to the people of their original traditions.

The works of spiritual poetry or "ilahi" belong to the lyro-epic genre of the Tatar traditional musical culture. In the Arab and Turkic Muslim countries, these are variously called *nashids*, *kasyys*, *munajats*, and *zikh*. Tatars have called them *bait*, *munajats*, *zikh*, *kasyys*, *beyans*. Like the Turkic and Iranian-speaking peoples, the Tatars performed them to the accompaniment of the traditional oriental musical instruments: *def*, *tanbur*, and *dumbra*.

These works had a special place in the life of the Tatar people, but in connection with the onset of total atheism, these traditions experienced severe persecution during the Soviet times. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, religious genres have gained their former popularity. And now there is a process of their revival, both in an authentic form and in the works of modern Tatar composers.

Among the Tatars, the tradition of performing works of the lyro-epic genre is still saved. For example, in the Alkeevsky district of Tatarstan, there are ancient traditions of the collective performance by women of *baits* and *munajats*. These works are performed, transcribed, and stored in family archives.

Thus, spiritual songs of the Tatars revived again and are popular today. Originated under the influence of the culture of the Turkic and Iranian Muslim peoples, these songs were developed by Tatar Sufis – dervishes for many centuries, and lived secretly in the traditions of home singing in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### References

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