

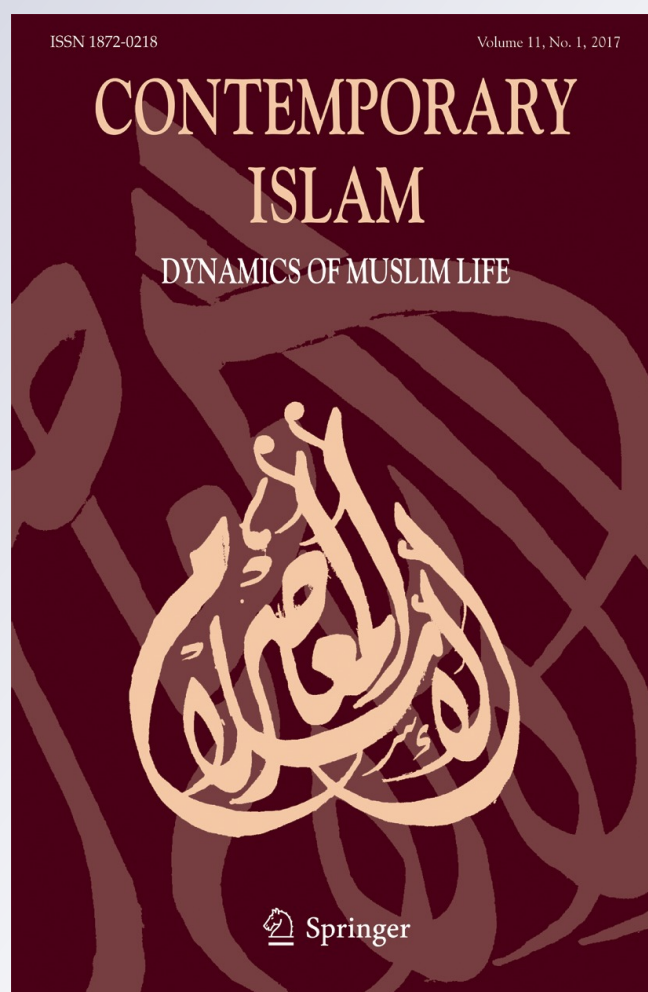
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Contemporary Islam
Dynamics of Muslim Life

ISSN 1872-0218
Volume 11
Number 1

Cont Islam (2017) 11:61-80
DOI 10.1007/s11562-017-0383-9



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Migration and contemporary Muslim space in Moscow. Contextualizing North Caucasian loud Dhikr and the religious practices of Central Asian *Folk Mullas*

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Published online: 1 April 2017

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Abstract Over the last fifteen years, the ethnic make-up of Moscow’s mosques has undergone significant change, while the number of practicing Muslims has grown manifold. These quantitative changes are connected with both the internal migration of people from the North Caucasian republics (a migration that had already begun in the early 1990s) and the external migration of natives of Central Asian states, primarily Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kirgizia (a mass migration dating from the 2000s). This paper is dedicated to two phenomena of contemporary Moscow Muslim life – the loud dhikr of the Kunta Hajji wurd of the Qadiri tariqa, practiced by Chechens and Ingush; and the religious practices of the Central Asian “uninstitutionalized” mullas. Both spiritual practices are popular and have great significance for a considerable proportion of Moscow Muslims, including those who do not directly participate in them. What both practices have in common is also found in their marginal nature with regard both to institutionalized Moscow Islam and to the fundamentalist trend which is now gathering steam here. This is an attempt to identify some specific features of contemporary Moscow Islam through the analysis of certain practices.

Keywords Moscow · Migration · Sufi · Religious practices · Diaspora · Integration · Ritual

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This paper is focused on two phenomena of contemporary Moscow Muslim life – the loud *dhikr* of the Kunta Hajji wurd of the Qadiri tariqa, practiced by Chechens and Ingush in the Historical Mosque; and the religious practices of the Central Asian “uninstitutionalized”¹ mullas (I will subsequently refer to these as “folk mullas” (“narodny mulla” in Rus.) – the accepted term used among Moscow Muslims when speaking in Russian) at the Cathedral Mosque. Broadly speaking, the paper concerns the social, ethnic, ideological and behavioral pluralism of the Muslim Moscow space created by post-Soviet migration. Moscow is the largest and one of the most migration-attractive capital cities of the post-socialist/post-Soviet space (Kashnitsky and Gunko 2016: 30). Anthropologically, the paper is an attempt to show how religious practices produce new social spaces and construct new dimensions of identity. The research concerns cohesion between identity and religious practice within a postsecular urban space (Baker and Beaumont 2011).

While *dhikr* is a religious practice observed by internal migrants – Chechens and Ingush who have moved from Russia’s North Caucasian federal republics, the practice of consulting “folk mullas” is primarily found among external migrants from the states of Central Asia. In terms of daily life in the Moscow environment, however, including the city’s Muslim community, whose elite is made up exclusively of Tatars,² this difference between Central Asian and internal Caucasian migrants is leveled. Both spiritual practices are popular and have great significance for a considerable proportion of Moscow Muslims, including those who do not directly participate in them. What both practices have in common is also found in their marginal nature with regard both to institutionalized Moscow Islam and to the fundamentalist trend which is now gathering steam here.

It is thought that religious practices, behaviors and values change through the process of migration (Akhtar 2014: 232; Predelli 2008: 244). I assume that the practices are not merely changing or adapting to the new environment, but are being filled with new meanings, which satisfy the new needs of the actors and construct new dimensions of identity that were not necessary at home. This idea corresponds to the conclusion of Parveen Akhtar’s research among Pakistani Muslim women in the UK, for whom religious practices offered a link to their former lives and provided an anchor with which to navigate life in England (Akhtar 2014: 236). Identities are negotiated and reconstituted in the context of transnationalism (Brettell 2015: 165; Kabir 2014; Cesari 2013) and are often shaped or emphasized within the migrant religious field: “In the absence of residential concentration, it is collective activities in religious institutions that provide the context for ethno-religious consciousness”

¹ I would like to comment on the particular terms “official” / “institutionalized” mulla and “unofficial” / “uninstitutionalized” mulla used in this paper. These terms have nothing in common with Soviet religious history and the classical Soviet dichotomy of private or family-based unofficial Islam and the restricted official Muslim sphere. “Official mulla/imam” denotes a person employed in the mosque, whereas the “unofficial” or, more precisely, “uninstitutionalized mulla” defines a person who is not officially connected to the mosque but who performs rituals within a mosque and is considered by believers to be a mulla. Within the Moscow context, these “unofficial” mullas are mostly respected Central Asian migrants who have a profound knowledge of Islam, the Koran and the ritual sphere. Of course, these terms are not terms taken from popular usage – they are simply used here in this paper for the sake of clarity. People call the unofficial or uninstitutionalized mulla a “folk mulla” or just “mulla”. They call the official mulla/imam “imam” or just use their names. There are clear differences between so-called folk mullas and official imams. These differences are obvious for my informants. But I admit that these differences are not specifically expressed in language, specifically Russian in this case.

² Virtually all “official” imams in Moscow mosques are Tatars.

(Brettell 2015: 166). I suggest, and intend to demonstrate in this paper, that the Muslim practices concerned not only shape the religious or ethnic dimensions of identity of the actors, but also, less obviously, a Muscovite dimension of identity.

I am going to contextualize the practices and show their deep engagement in the Moscow Muslim space and broader urban social environment. Despite the practices' obvious opposition to the outside world, both religious and urban, they can only be understood within this hostile context. Here, as a background, I take Loïc Wacquant's idea, by which he revealed a deep connection between the boxing gym and the hostile environment of the black ghetto in Chicago: "The boxing gym thus defines itself in and through a relation of symbiotic opposition to the ghetto that surrounds and enfolds it" (Wacquant 2004: 56). In that sense, the focus of the research are not the practices themselves, but the practices in the context and complicated interrelation with the religious and broader social environment of Moscow.

The city of Moscow has barely registered in studies of contemporary Russian Islam (March 2010: 84), though it has become one of the main Muslim centers in the country. This is an attempt to identify some specific features of contemporary Moscow Islam through the analysis of certain practices. Moscow differs from other Western cities in terms of its migrant, predominantly Muslim community. That is why it seems far-fetched to incorporate Russian Muslim studies into European and American discourse. First of all, Moscow does not have distinct ethnic urban areas. The migrant population is dispersed throughout the city. Secondly, though there had been already two mosques in Moscow prior to the Revolution of 1917, its numerous Muslim population is young and part of a diaspora that has formed quite recently – within the last twenty years. Thirdly, ethnic and regional identities among Moscow Muslims play a greater consolidating role for their respective communities than a religious one per se.

The fieldwork was carried out from March to mid-August 2015. The month of Ramadan lasted from the 17th of June to the 17th of July of this year – a time of intensification of religious life. It is in Ramadan in particular that many believers take their vacations from work in order to fully devote themselves to fasting, reading the Koran, and strive to spend more time in the mosque. I was able to observe Muslim life in Moscow before Ramadan, during the holy month, on the holiday of *Uraza Bayram* (*Eid al-Fitr*), and after the close of Ramadan. I thus had the opportunity over a relatively short period of time to examine the Muslim space of Moscow in various different states. I conducted the fieldwork in two of the four mosques found in Moscow, as well as in official and unofficial prayer-halls. I made deep and extended interviews with the imams, the "folk mullas", the readers or *alims* (recognized experts on the theoretical and practical aspects of Islam), the *murids* of the Kunta Hajji wîrd, and with opponents of the dhikr. Shorter conversations were engaged in during the post-fast iftar, or after *namaz* (salat) in the mosques and prayer-halls, as well as at markets and the halal cafes attached to the mosques. I was present at conversations between the *on-duty imams*³ and members of the congregation, at rites carried out by the *folk mullas*, and regularly attended dhikr over the course of two months. The article is mostly based on data from my deep and extended

³ Each mosque has its on-duty imams («dezurny imam» in Rus.), who receive the congregation. They are able to read prayers, conduct ceremonies, and simply give advice. An on-duty imam sits in a special room every day to receive members of the congregation according to a queue system. Each mosque has several imams who perform this duty regularly.

interviews with 21 men and nearly 30 short interviews. I translated all the interviews from Russian. To respect the privacy of the informants, I indicate only their approximate age and ethnic identity.

The Muslim space of Moscow and its specific religious practices

According to John Esposito, it is no longer correct to simply speak of Islam versus the West, for Islam is very much within, an integral part of, the West (Esposito 2007: 133). This statement is likewise applicable to Moscow. Islam is not as visible in the Russian capital as in other large European migration spots such as Paris or Brussels, but it is tightly woven into the urban fabric. There are far more Muslim sites in the agglomeration than the average Muscovite could imagine. Writing about Western Muslim integration, Justin Gest concludes that Islam is powerfully contextualized and itself transformed by the variable sociopolitical environments in which Western Muslims are situated (Gest 2012: 190). I assume that the present Muslim space in Moscow could be characterized as partly-hidden, diverse, flexible, and rooted in the city environment.

Moscow's Islamic history dates back to the Middle Ages. Before the 1917 Revolution there were two mosques in the city, several areas with a high Tatar Muslim population density, and a school for Muslim children. The Soviet period saw a mass migration of the Tatars to Moscow. By the 1990s, the absolute majority of Moscow Muslims were Tatars – an often well-educated fluent Russian-speaking invisible minority. Over the last fifteen years, however, the ethnic make-up of Moscow's mosques has undergone significant change, and the number of practicing Muslims has grown manifold. If as recently as the early 2000s, the Cathedral Mosque was never completely full even on *jum'ah namaz* (Friday prayers), according to the recollections of imams and members of the congregation, then now, at “the Mosque on Prospekt Mira”,⁴ Friday services are attended by 6–7 thousand people. These quantitative changes are connected with both the internal migration of people from the North Caucasian republics (a migration that had already begun in the early 1990s) and the external migration of natives of Central Asian states, primarily Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kirgizia (a mass migration dating from the 2000s). Migration has had a significant impact on the Muslim space of Moscow. To give an example, the language of *khutba* (preaching) at the mosques had been Tatar up until the mid-1990s, at which point it began to be given in Tatar and Russian. The *on-duty imams* now mainly receive migrants, and visit them in communal dwellings and at rented apartments to read the Koran and take part in local rites⁵; the migrants themselves have created an elaborate and rich Muslim infrastructure in the city. The last fifteen years have seen Moscow's Muslim space become multi-ethnic and heterogeneous – new spiritual practices have taken hold and developed, without having a base among the “old Muslims”, mainly made up of Tatars. Mono-ethnic Central Asian, North Caucasian and Azeri *jamaats*⁶ have formed, and “unofficial” Central

⁴ This is the customary name by which the Cathedral Mosque is known among Muscovites. Although the mosque is found at a distance of some 200 m from Prospekt Mira itself, on the crossroads of Vypolzov Pereulok and Ulitsa Durova, it stands in close proximity to the Prospekt Mira Metro station.

⁵ Moscow imams occasionally encounter such unorthodox requests as to read the Koran over water and foodstuffs, or during the rite of the bleeding out of a cockerel, by which Uzbeks mark the moving of a family or group of countrymen to a new home.

⁶ Here I use this term to define a Muslim community – a separate and self-sustained group of the believers united by the practice, ethnic/regional/language background or any other common ideology.

Asian mullas and *alims* have appeared. Large and diverse Moscow *umma* now has other demands and other difficulties.

It is not only the influx of new ethnicities that has made the contemporary Moscow Muslim space so heterogeneous. The diversity of Muslim community in Moscow is not necessarily ethnic, but is rather social and existential. These social borders correspond to those of ethnicity, however. The Tatars are thought to be wealthier, more urbanized and Russified, and more socially advantaged than the more recently arrived Central Asians. Migration waves of North Caucasians, Azeris, and above all Central Asians have brought to Moscow a great number of those who adhere to their traditional background and rural way of life. Central Asian labor migrants form the most disadvantaged urban category in Moscow. Many of them are illegal, some fleeing religious or political persecution in their home countries, who have little chance of receiving legal asylum in Russia. They constitute the most unprotected and deprived of rights category of immigrants. North Caucasian migrants, particularly Chechens and Ingush, face serious discrimination problems despite being Russian citizens and are much more vulnerable to the police or employment discriminatory practices than such other large ethnic minorities in Moscow as Tatars or Armenians. People from the same region have a similar background and consequently similar migration experience in Russia. The Muslim practices analyzed in this paper are performed by those who face obvious social problems in Moscow – the Chechens and Ingush, and the predominantly rural labor migrants from Central Asia.

There are four mosques currently open in Moscow, two of which date to pre-Revolution times. The majority of the congregations of all mosques are natives of Central Asia. The Moscow Cathedral Mosque on Vypolzov Pereulok was founded in 1904 and remained open throughout the Soviet era. In 2011, the old mosque building was demolished. Its replacement was opened on the 24th September 2015 shortly before *Kurban Bayram (Eid al-Adha)*. The usual attendance figures for *jum'ah namaz* are around 6–7 thousand persons, and for *Uraza Bayram (Eid al-Fitr)* and *Kurban Bayram* reach 100–150 thousand. Control over daily religious life used to be less strict in the Cathedral Mosque than at others in the city. The Cathedral Mosque has become a focal point for “folk” or “uninstitutionalized” mullas from Central Asia, as well as *alims*, mainly Tajiks, who gather groups around themselves after *jum'ah namaz* to tell stories from the life of the Prophet, attempt to educate the worshippers, and explain the ethical norms of Islam, sometimes teaching Arabic and Koran reading classes. The Cathedral Mosque, as the largest, most conveniently situated and most famous among newcomers to the city, has become a meeting place for believers, particularly migrants, as well as a place where people can receive not only religious clarification, but also practical assistance from their countrymen. The trend for mosques to begin to fulfill a wide range of functions is universal for the early stages of diaspora shaping. The experience of Central Asians in Moscow of the 2000s to 2010s is similar to that of Pakistanis in Britain after decolonization: “Hence besides providing an arena for the collective performance of namaz, they [mosques – D.O.] also became gathering points in which lonely men could meet, socialize and exchange information – a function which they retain to this day” (Ballard 2006: 177).

On the 1993 reopening of the Historical Mosque, situated on the territory of the former Tatar Quarter, the overwhelming number of worshippers almost immediately became made up of those hailing from the Northern Caucasian republics. This was connected with a simultaneous migration of refugees from the Caucasus. Now, as in other Moscow mosques, incomers from Central Asia constitute the majority. Despite its territorial proximity to the cultural center of the Moscow Tatar community, Asadullayev House, Tatars are almost

absent as worshippers in Moscow's oldest mosque. Readings by *alims* are virtually unknown here and there are no *folk mullas*, but loud Sufi dhikr is conducted in the cellar on a regular basis on the forced permission of the mosque administration. There are two types of dhikr practices in the mosque, the Dagestani dhikr of the Naqshbandi tariqa and the Vainakh dhikr of the Qadiri tariqa. The Qadiri tariqa is mainly the reserve of Chechens and Ingush, while the dhikr of the Naqshbandi tariqa is mainly that of Dagestani peoples, as well as Tatars, Russian converts and Uzbeks.

Beside Moscow's four mosques, thirteen prayer halls are in operation under the jurisdiction of the Moscow City Spiritual Directorate of Muslims ("DUM Moskvyy") that is part of the Russian Federation Spiritual Directorate of Muslims (the head is Rawil Gaynetdin). These are located on the edges of town – in Chertanovo, Butovo, Tushino, Lyublino and other areas – and each one is attended by around 300 people every Friday. Such venues facilitate the building of personal relations between visitors, as well as between their visitors and the imams. A great multitude of unregistered places exist for cult activities. Traders and deliverymen create prayer rooms at markets. There are prayer rooms in halal cafes and restaurants, on building sites, and people gather for collective prayer in flats and offices. The prayer halls and mosques in the towns neighboring Moscow also constitute part of the Moscow Muslim space. They are attended by residents of the city's outskirts, for whom it is sometimes quicker to get to Balashikha or Mytishchi than to the city center. Suburban Moscow *jamaats* are attractive to believers because they are distinguished by their compact nature, small congregations and greater potential for mutual aid.



Friday prayer during Ramadan in front of the one of prayer halls on the edge of Moscow. 2015. Photo: Dmitriy Oparin

The degree of religiosity among migrants varies considerably. The greater part consider themselves Muslims but do not observe all the obligatory five pillars of Islam. They perform *namaz* not five times daily at the appointed hour, but whenever they find time, and are similarly spontaneous in their mosque attendance. Many, however, try to visit one of the four Moscow mosques for *jum'ah namaz*, and also take part in collective holiday prayers. There are others who not only observe all the five pillars of Islam, but try to pray daily in a mosque,⁷ fast rigorously and take time off during Ramadan to spend all their time in the city's mosques. Attending Sunday schools and membership of Sufi *tariqa* are not widespread among Central Asian migrants. These spiritual practices are more characteristic of Tatars, certain natives of the North Caucasian republics, and neophytes.

Both religious practices in focus - the loud Qadiri *dhikr* and the religious practices of the Central Asian mullas and lecturers - are primarily associated with migrants and are marginal in relation to institutionalized Islam in the capital. Nevertheless, these practices are localized in the two central mosques of the city. It should be noted, however, that *dhikr* takes place in the basement and receives no particular support from the side of the mosque administration, while the *folk mullas* prefer to conduct ceremonies beyond the bounds of the mosque due to the interdiction of the "official" imams. Both religious practices thus occupy a peripheral position in the mosques and are localized, on the one hand, inside the mosque, and on the other, outside the mosque.

Despite the existence of numerous official and underground prayer halls, Moscow Muslim life, including its above mentioned marginal manifestations, gravitates towards the city's official mosques. Although the territory around the Cathedral Mosque has been a building site over the last ten years, with construction work repeatedly stopping and starting, and worshippers on *jum'ah namaz* and holidays have been forced to pray either in the street or, until recently, in a marquis, this mosque nonetheless remains the most popular and most attended by migrants. This contradiction is explained, firstly, by the desire of the believers to pray as part of the largest possible *jamaat*. Although the Hanafi madhhab, to which the majority of Muslim in the former Soviet Union belong, has it that three people alone is sufficient a gathering for Friday prayers, believers consider that the *adzher* (reward) from Allah is greater when greater numbers come together to pray. Many Muslims therefore aim to make their way to the Cathedral Mosque on a Friday, where the congregation is largest. The appeal of this mosque is also explained by the fact that migrants who have only just arrived in Moscow make their way there, making this venue the place where many have formed a certain social circle, where they have got to know the imams and *folk mullas*, thus disinclining them to change their place of prayer. Finally, Moscow's islamophobia and migrantophobia limit the choice of places open to Muslim incomers for prayer and other religious practices – people are simply afraid of gathering in "unofficial" halls and feel relative safety within the legally "designed" space of the Cathedral Mosque. The latter one is the main reason why so called marginalized or not mainstream religious practices take place within already existent religious space.

⁷ According to the Hanafi madhhab, it is only obligatory to visit the mosque on Fridays. Women do not have to come to the mosque at all.

The Vainakh dhikr in the Historical Mosque

Dhikr is the ritual remembrance of Allah by Sufis, performed according to a special formula, spoken aloud (*dhikr jahri*) or to oneself (*dhikr khafi*), and accompanied by certain bodily movements. The aim of dhikr is to attain mystical ecstasy (*wajd*), during which a Sufi may become closer to God (Roshchin 2009: 217). Certain interpretations of particular ayat in the Koran are found which Sufis regard as direct references to loud dhikr.⁸ The concept of dhikr may also be interpreted in a much wider sense. An imam of the Moscow jamaat of the Naqshbandi-Shadhili tariqa thus explained that even a chance thought of Allah may be referred to as dhikr (nearly 40, Avar). It should be noted that dhikr, unlike namaz, is considered by dhikrists themselves as a voluntary, as opposed to obligatory, spiritual practice.

The Moscow Sufi space

There exist a great number of Sufi jamaats in Moscow. Most of them number no more than ten to fifteen persons. People assemble with varying frequency at private apartments and in rented offices to collectively perform either loud or quiet dhikr, according to their wird. Such jamaats are most often multi-ethnic in membership and use Russian, being made up of Russian converts, Tatars, and Muslims of other ethnicities who have come to Islam in adulthood through one Sufi teaching or another. The followers of the tariqa of (Shaykh) Nazim al-Haqqani have been gathering together in Moscow for several years, representing one of the most numerous and widespread tariqas worldwide, known for their extensive international network (Nielsen et al. 2006: 103). In Moscow, however, the sheikh's followers who gather for loud dhikr number no more than ten persons. This tariqa enjoys more popularity in Bashkiria and Dagestan.

The largest gatherings take place in the cellar of the Historical Mosque. Murids of the Naqshbandi - Shadhili tariqas of Sheikh Akhmad Hajji assemble there every Thursday and Sunday. At the loud dhikr, which the murids observe sitting in darkness, around 150 people gather. The murids of this wird first held their gatherings around seven years ago, and were given use of the mosque's cellar space in 2010. Thursday assemblies can have all murids in attendance, while Sundays see only those gathering who have met the sheikh personally and received wird from him.⁹ The sermon read after dhikr was formerly in the Avar language, as Avars made up the backbone of the jamaat, though it has been read only in Russian in recent times. The majority of murids are Avars and those of other Dagestani peoples. Dhikr is also attended by Tatars, Russian Muslims, Uzbeks, Chechens, Tajiks, and even Armenians.

⁸ Ayats 17:110; 62:1, 9, and 10.

⁹ The term is used in this instance in the sense of *task* or *assignment*.

The origins of Vainakh dhikr

The oldest and most consolidated Moscow Sufi jamaat is that of the Kunta Hajji wird of the Qadiri tariqa. Loud dhikr performed in a circle is characteristic of this wird. The murids are the followers of the Chechen spiritual proselytizer Kunta Hajji Kishiyeu (1830(?)–1867). This form of dhikr was developed in Chechnya and Ingushetiya in the mid nineteenth century. Sufism became one of the main forms taken by Islam in the Northern Caucasus (Alikberov 2001: 90) and the Kunta Hajji wird of the Qadiri tariqa is the most popular in Chechnya and Ingushetiya. This is now the largest brotherhood in these republics, and is tightly woven with the political establishment. Kunta Hajji followers are found in all positions of power in Chechnya: in the government, the muftiat, mosques, and medrese (Vatchagaev 2014: 32).

The wird of Kunta Hajji appeared in Chechnya and Ingushetiya during the lifetime of the teacher (*ustadh*), during the extended military subjugation of the North Caucasus by the Russian Empire. Unlike Imam Shamil, Kunta Hajji preached peace and non-opposition to the Russians. Imam Shamil had made three unsuccessful attempts to convert the Ingush to Islam, but this was only achieved by Kunta Hajji: “The Ingush, knowing the will of Allah, had already quit their homes, left all their work and cares, and come out to meet the Holy Ustadh” (Malsagov 2001: 16). In 1863, Kunta Hajji was arrested by the Tsarist administration and sent off in a convoy to Vladikavkaz, dying in exile in 1867 in the province of Vologda. The Murids, disciples of the Kunta Hajji wird, never say that their *ustadh* is dead, using instead the phrase “hidden”: “Our sight cannot see him. We cannot see *djinns*, either. But they exist, and Kunta Hajji too” (b. 1972, Ingush). As Islam scholar Anna Zelkina writes, “despite the astonishing popularity of the first Caucasian Qadiri sheikh, Kunta Hajji (Kishiyeu), among Chechens and Ingush, even his disciples draw information on his life solely from oral tradition” (Zelkina 2006: 35). Indeed, a great many legends are told of this Vainakh *ustadh*, many of which are retold by the murids at sermons which follow the dhikr.

Since conflict broke out between Ossets and Ingush in 1992, a flood of Ingush has poured into Moscow, followed by Chechens in the First Chechen War. In the early 1990s, Vainakhs conducted loud dhikr in an office by Dobryninskaya Metro station. In 1993, the Historical Mosque opened,¹⁰ with the first loud dhikr taking place there at the end of 1994. The outbreak of war in Chechnya had served as the motive for this, and Moscow’s growing Vainakh community turned to the mosque’s Tatar administration with a request for permission to conduct loud dhikr twice a week. According to the recollections of the then imam Makhmud Velitov, the dhikrists had assembled one time on the ground floor of the building, and got in the way of other members of the congregation. The religious practice was alien to the mosque’s other congregation members, and the imam asked the murids to hold gatherings without performing the circular loud dhikr. Ultimately, due to pressure from the administration, the Vainakhs were forced to take to the cellar in

¹⁰ It had been shut down in 1937, and was transferred to the Muslim community in 1990, with reconstruction work being realized with Saudi funding.

1997. From that moment on, dhikr has been performed virtually continuously at the Historical Mosque. In 2001, near an Ingush halal slaughterhouse in the Moscow suburb of Vidnoye (4 km from Moscow), a small prayer hall was opened in which loud dhikr according to the *wird* of Kunta Hajji also began to be performed. No more than fifteen persons from Vidnoye and the south of Moscow gather there. The greater Moscow region thus has two venues at this date where the circular loud dhikr is held.

Characteristics of dhikr

Every Wednesday and Sunday, murids of the Kunta Hajji *wird* gather in the cellar of the mosque on Bolshaya Tatarskaya. The Jamaat consists mainly of adult men aged from forty to sixty years of age. These sometimes bring their sons, nephews and grandsons to the dhikr. The murids first commemorate Allah in a sitting position, then they begin to move slowly in an anti-clockwise circle. After a certain point they begin to move faster. All repeat the phrase “*ullokh-ullolokh*” (a form of the main formula of the dhikr, *lā ilāha illā-llāh*) to a single rhythm. The ritual lasts on average around one and a half hours. The circular loud dhikr symbolizes the ring of angels around the throne of Allah (Roshchin 2009: 219). The space inside the circle immediately becomes a holy place, to which *barakah* (Yakhiyev 1996: 51) descends – divine grace. Dhikrists conceive of the ritual as a living substance which can act in various different ways. There are days when the dhikr goes successfully, and the murids reach ecstasy (*wajd*). On other occasions, however, the dhikr is “limp” and, in spite of observance of all the ritual norms, the murids leave the mosque disappointed. The criterion by which the stage of “successfulness” of the dhikr is assessed is the level of energy generated in the place: “There’s good dhikr, and sometimes the dhikr doesn’t come. Dhikr is unpredictable, and comes not when you want it to, but when dhikr wants to. It’s all as plain as if it were on the palm of your hand. Dhikr can throw you off like foam is tossed off by the sea. These are very subtle feelings.” (b. 1972, Ingush).

Rushing round in a circle repeating the formula of the dhikr to the sung accompaniment of the *muamists* (the murids who are able to sing), is followed by a sermon. An imam or guest murid, most often a respected person from Chechnya or Ingushetiya in town on business, recites ayats from the Koran or shares with the jamaat one of the many semi-mythical stories about the life of Kunta Hajji. At one of the gatherings, the tale of the suffering of the *ustadh* brought many of the murids to tears. They later explained their reaction to me by the emotional state which they were in following the circular dhikr. After the sermon, the youngsters taking part in the dhikr pour everybody a sweet hot drink with lemon. This beverage is brought to the mosque in large vessels by the staff of a nearby café.

While running round in the circle, the men sweat, and cool down while listening to the sermon, they then drink water and perform the final commemoration of Allah while seated. One of the murids stated that the sweat does not evaporate by itself, but is taken away by the angels of Allah. They carry this moisture to the heavens. When Allah becomes angry with any given group of people, the angels pour the sweat they have collected onto this group in the form of rain. Allah then ceases to be angry with those people who have been moistened in this way by the sweat worked up during dhikr (b. 1970, Ingush).



Vainakh dhikr in the basement of the Historical mosque, Moscow. 2015. Photo: Dmitriy Oparin

In each jamaat of the Qadiri Kunta Hajji wurd there are found, besides the usual murids, a *turkh*, *tamada* and a mulla. The *turkh*'s duties include keeping order during the dhikr, and the personal care of each murid. When explaining the essence of the *turkh*'s activities, my informers compared him with a *starshina* (NCO in the army), a *starosta* (class monitor at school), and the manager of a *sovkhos* (state-owned farm). The *turkh* knows each one of the dhikrists of his jamaat, and he, in the words of one of the members of the Moscow jamaat, "must pass through each and every murid, like a thread through rosary beads, knowing everything about them, knowing their character, being a mother to each of them" (b. 1970, Ingush). The *turkh* remains standing when the rest sit down, and walks around, standing over the participants, rarely entering into the circular procession. The *turkh* has to meet all those wishing to join the jamaat. He has the telephone numbers of all the murids, and if anyone is unable to attend dhikr, he should call the *turkh* to tell him in advance. The *turkh* then gives the dhikrist *puram* (Ingush) or "approval", according to which, even if the murid misses dhikr, it is still as though he had participated in it. While the *turkh* is compared to the manager of a *sovkhos*, the *tamada* is compared to its director. The *tamada* is the head of the jamaat, and not a single decision is taken without his agreement. The *tamada* should control the cohesion of the jamaat, overseeing, as one informer put it, "the psychological comfort" of each of the murids, and cultivate the jamaat's relations with the surrounding world.

What does dhikr give the murids?

My informants applied the term murid not only to dhikrists, but also to those Chechens and Ingush who do not attend dhikr or only rarely attend the ritual, but who live in Moscow and consider themselves part of this jamaat: “There are people who don’t come to dhikr – they don’t want to, are shy, or haven’t the opportunity. But they support us very strongly, and live in a state of dhikr. And there are others who do come regularly to dhikr, and yet are not found in a state of dhikr” (b. 1972, Ingush). In this case, under the concept of “a state of dhikr”, the murid is referring not to *wajd* or mystical religious ecstasy, but to a certain way of life proper to a Sufi, a dhikrist, or a murid of Kunta Hajji. Many of the murids described this state to me by means of the Russian word *namerenie* (intention) or *niyyah* (Arabic). The dhikrist lives with a sincere and positive *niyyah*, waging *jihad* against his own body and soul. On the day of dhikr, the murid strives with special effort to refrain from doing anything wrong. To live in a state of dhikr is to live in the interests and by the interests of the jamaat: “Dhikr gives everything. There are things that cannot be explained in words. It accompanies the murids their whole life long, and everything is connected with dhikr” (b. 1963, Ingush).

The ritual itself, at the moment it is conducted and for a certain period of time afterwards, gives the dhikrist a boost of energy. Virtually all my informers answered the question “What does dhikr give you?” with metaphors: “If only you could feel what I can feel just once in your life. Dhikr is sweetness, a taste, a sweet dream, sweet food, a sweet swim, a breath of fresh air” (b. 1972, Ingush). Unquestionably, the murids experience a surge of energy after a strenuous circular dhikr, with many telling me that it improves their stamina, as well as their sleep: “You’re slender like a stream, and trim, your thoughts are clean, with vigor, energy, and your soul rejoices” (b. 1970, Ingush). Murids call dhikr food for the soul and a mill to grind down sins.

The unity of the jamaat around dhikr is shaped, among other things, on the basis of collective historical memory of the sufferings of the Chechens and Ingush. Murids believe that, thanks to their love for the *ustadh* and their discipline in conducting the dhikr, the Vainakhs were able to survive the times of the imperial subjugation of the North Caucasus, the period of deportations (1944–57), the Soviet struggle against religion, and finally the Chechen Wars of the 1990s. People often tell the stories of their parents and grandparents who had lived through to the deportation to Kazakhstan. Thanks to dhikr, as some of my informers would have it, the frozen and unfertile soils of the Kazakh steppe thawed and began to bring forth harvests. Despite the danger that assembling together in public places presented to Chechens and Ingush in the Moscow of the 1990s, people still went to dhikr, some of them then ending up in police stations. The first turkh of the Moscow jamaat believes that genuine and strong Islam was preserved in the Caucasus solely among dhikrists: “Even the Dagestanis are astonished at our Islam. They accepted Islam earlier, but we held out. We distinguished ourselves from other Muslims thanks to this dhikr. Wherever dhikr was, there Islam stayed fresh, and where they was no dhikr, there Islam, so to speak, faded away” (b. 1950s, Ingush).

The Vainakh jamaat of the Sufi Qadiris is one of the most consolidated religious and ethnic groups in Moscow. The murids gather not only to carry out the ritual and listen to a sermon in Chechen/Ingush, but compose a single community, whose members help one another in worldly affairs. The murids of the Moscow jamaat are supported by influential Chechens and Ingush. If any dhikrist has a problem, the community tries to resolve it collectively. Moreover, the murids are prepared to help any Chechen or Ingush in Moscow

who suffers misfortune. The Vainakh community in the capital knows that the Qadiri jamaat at the Historical Mosque is one of the strongest and most active Caucasian institutions in the city. One example of the widespread form of collective activity of the murids is that of the organization of the transportation of the remains of deceased Vainakhs back to their homeland. Chechens and Ingush prefer to bury their relatives in the Caucasus. For this purpose, the turkh looks after the collected financial resources of the murids – the group's common fund that exists on a permanent basis.

The murids and the wider Moscow Muslim context

Circular loud dhikr is a marginal practice in the context of the heterogeneous Muslim space of Moscow. The fact that the dhikr is held on the premises of an ordinary Moscow mosque has increased the number of those who oppose this religious practice. Those coming out openly against dhikr include both congregation members and the Tatar mosque administration. All the imams that I was able to speak to avowed a concern for the preservation of the building, on account of the vibration in its structure felt during the circular dhikr. Displeasure is expressed by other worshippers as well as the residents of the surrounding homes. The administration has several times attempted to forbid dhikr in the mosque, but intercession on behalf of the Moscow jamaat has come from the President of Chechnya Ramzan Kadyrov and State Duma Deputy Adam Delimkhanov. The murids have tried without success to find a new venue to perform the ceremony, but understand that a mosque in the very center of town would be the safest, most stable and convenient place for the Vainakh dhikr. Chechens and Ingush can merge here into the pre-existing Muslim space of the Historical Mosque without drawing any extra attention to themselves in an islamophobic city. A new place would require a lengthy and, most likely, painful process of establishing relations with the Muscovites living and working in its vicinity.

While the grievances of the administration boil down purely to formal and material issues, other believers criticize the Qadiri religious practice from the positions of their notions of Islam and based upon their social and/or ethnic experience as a Muslim. The most common criticisms of the opponents of the Sufis are ethical – many Muslims speak out against, as they term it, “dancing and singing in the mosque”. Some of the main opponents of the Qadiris are the Salafis, who refer to the religious practices of the murids as an “innovation” (*al-bid'ah*). In this polemic, the dhikrists maintain the view that, if that is so, everything that surrounds modern man could be called *bid'ah*, including, for example, the practice of reading the Koran, because the Prophet knew the Koran by heart. The Salafis, who do not accept Sufi practices, consider the special relationship that the Sufis have with their *sheikhs*, including Kunta Hajji, as a threshold to idolatry – *shirk* (Knysh 2007: 503–505). In their turn, the members of other Sufi tariqas themselves call in doubt the orthodoxy of the followers of Kunta Hajji who believe in the invisible presence of their *ustadh*. The suspicious attitude towards dhikr also characterizes the supporters of the so-called “political Islam”, which is gaining increasing popularity in Russia. Their grievance has it that the murids are interested exclusively in the ritual side of Islam and have placed a single ritual at the center of their daily, social and religious life. Adepts of political Islam do not accept the pacifist rhetoric of the Kunta Hajji wurd, which was formulated very eloquently by one of my informants: “Kunta Hajji came with peace, he said “Put away all swords.” He did not say: “Kill”. With him, it is: “Forgive, and it will be better for you. Lay down weapons, leave war, do dhikr” (b. 1962, Chechen). Discord between murids and the opponents of dhikr

reached its peak three years ago, when an unknown person threw a smoke bomb through the window of a room located in the basement of the mosque where the ritual was underway.

The practice of consulting *folk mullas* in the Cathedral Mosque

Who are the *folk mullas*?

One of the most widespread religious practices among migrants is that of resorting to Central Asian *folk mullas*, most of which may be found in the Cathedral Mosque. A *folk mulla* is somebody well versed in the theoretical and practical aspects of Islam. He is not an “official” imam, though he does lead ceremonies, can be consulted in questions of faith, teaches Koran reading and preaches self-organized sermons. *Folk mullas* are most often requested to read prayers, drive away *djinns*, and conduct marriage ceremonies (*nikah*). Many of them have been living in Moscow for several years and enjoy great popularity, both among external migrants and those coming from the Northern Caucasus, and even among Christians. People find out about a particular mulla through their acquaintances. In addition, the mullas get to know believers at the mosque, conversing with them there, where they can be consulted with when necessary, though they prefer to conduct ceremonies off the premises – the mosque administration does not encourage such practices. In the evenings, ceremonies can be held in the main hall of the mosque – a time when the imams are less likely to become aware of what is occurring there.



A Tajik folk mulla is driving away djins at the Cathedral Mosque, Moscow. 2015. Photo: Dmitriy Oparin

Their unofficial religious practice is rarely their main means of earning a living. As such, one of the most famous mullas works as a cleaner at a hospital, another works in the building construction, and a third is a taxi driver. Most are Tajiks, though there are some Uzbeks and Kirgiz. Some mullas take money for performing ceremonies. Not one of my informants mentioned any kind of price system – each one stated that the scale of the remuneration is determined by those requesting the service. Certain mullas assist believers free of charge as a matter of principle. However, these rarely show up at the mosque and prefer not to publicize their activities.

What are the requests to the *folk mullas*?

Problems concerning marriage and internal family relations are the most widespread. Migration takes its toll first of all on stability in the family. On top of this, the family sphere is rich in ceremonies, and problems in the family often require the intervention of an imam. Some ask mullas for permission to conduct a temporary or second *nikah* – the temporary registration of marriage according to Islamic custom. It is needed when a wife is located in Central Asia. Others complain of problems in the family, of the non-observance of the norms of Islam by a husband or wife. Migration has been accompanied by an increase in divorces, which must also be formalized according to the Sharia. One of the most common requests made by migrants to the mullas is to read prayers against fear, anxiety and agitation. One mulla even recounted how he had been approached with requests to read prayers that the individuals not be stopped by law enforcement to check their papers.

People often turn to the *folk mullas* with requests for the exorcism of *djinns*. Possession by *djinns* may reveal itself not only in abnormal behavior, but also in anxiety, fear, and visions. Sometimes the mullas conduct this ceremony in the mosque itself, other times they go out with the believers into the street – people are liable to start vomiting, and this is impermissible in the building. Many said that the expulsion of *djinns* demands energy, training and knowledge not possessed by the “official imams”. One Tajik *folk mulla* known for skill in expelling *djinns*, is visited by people coming to the Cathedral Mosque from as far away as neighboring regions.

Why do the Central Asian migrants prefer to consult *folk mulla*?

First of all, many migrants speak Russian badly, and so it is easier for them to deal with their own countrymen. One informant said that the imams may spend five minutes in communication with individual worshippers, while you can speak with a *folk mulla* for forty minutes or more. And there are indeed long queues for those wishing to speak to the *on-duty imams* in the mosques. People sit all together and can easily hear what any believer is talking about with the imam. Many find it difficult to open up before an imam in plain view of all the rest of the congregation. Believers most often approach the imams with specific ritual requests – to read the Koran for whatever reason. Such communication is not conducive to the building of personal relations between the imam and the

believers. The *folk mullas* always give their telephone number and are more open to dialogue than the Tatar imams in the mosques. There is also a certain level of mistrust for Tatars. Believers, particularly practicing Muslims from Central Asia, say that the imams “don’t eat halal”, their daughters “go to school in short skirts”, and they call the Tatar imams “Russians” and doubt their religious competence. Many are irritated by the tatarocentrism of Islam in Moscow: “in the mosques, the Tatars are only imams and security guards” (nearly 30 y.o., Tajik). Once at *khutba* in the Cathedral Mosque, the imam received a note: “There are no Tatars here, speak in Russian”. The imam answered that “there are Tatars here, and Uzbeks, Kirgiz and Kazakhs understand the Tatar language, and if the Tajiks are displeased with something, let them open their own mosque.” Many religious migrants consider Tatar superficial in the faith. According to my fieldwork conducted among Moscow Tatars in 2014 and Central Asian migrants in 2015, I can conclude that where urban Tatars look upon the imam as a cleric and come to him with requests for particular ceremonial services, the Central Asian migrants turn to the “official imam” or the *folk mulla* with all their problems, often not connected in the slightest with ritual matters, and expect to be given advice, explanations and assistance.

The fundamental reason behind the preference for *folk mulla* over the imams is that the mullas can be called and invited to conduct ceremonies on a building site or at a private home. Many migrants do not have papers, and so they take a risk in moving around the city and cannot get to the mosque. On the request of a believer, a mulla can even go out of the city or visit another region.

Sporadic lectures in the Cathedral Mosque

After *jum’ah namaz*, and occasionally before evening prayers (*maghrib*) too, listeners gather for readings or sermons in the men’s hall of the Cathedral mosque. Individual experts on Islam form around themselves a circle of believers and tell them *sunnahs*, explaining the ethical side of the Muslim faith. Some of the speakers conduct different rituals in spare time and serve as *folk mullas* at home, in the mosques or at the construction sites. The most numerous such circles are Tajik-speaking. From time to time, Kirgiz gather too. Sometimes Russian-speaking circles also form. People give questions, engage in disputes, and comment on the utterances of the reader. Some informants said that they go to *jum’ah namaz* not for the sake of the imam’s *khutba*, but for the readings by the *alim* that follow. In the month of Ramadan, around ten such circles headed by a reader can be counted in the mosque on Fridays after *namaz*.



Sporadic lectures in the Cathedral Mosque after Friday prayer. Moscow. 2015. Photo: Dmitriy Oparin

The circles differ in size. Sometimes only ten people gather. In this case the lecture is delivered quietly in a confidential atmosphere. There are circles that number more than fifty listeners. In such cases the alim speaks loudly, passionately, receiving feedback from the audience, and this feedback is not always quiet or consonant. Any listener can start arguing with a speaker, can deliver a short speech himself, or even split the circle and lure away part of the audience.

Conclusion

Jamaatization as an adaptive mechanism

The contemporary Muslim space of Moscow is distinguished by its fragmentary, disunited and heterogeneous nature. People most often group together by ethnicity. A large number of mono-ethnic jamaats of differing scales have thus appeared – from Vainakh communities of dhikrists to the groups of Tajik believers who attend the spontaneously organized readings by the Tajik alim after jum'ah namaz. One of the principal conclusions at which I have arrived over the course of this research is that, in order to become part of the Muslim space of Moscow, to feel involved in the religious

world of the capital and create comfortable conditions for himself in the mosque, a migrant has to join a given jamaat, become a member of some group or a participant in a pre-packaged religious practice.¹¹ Thus, incorporation in Moscow Muslim space is achieved by self-compartmentalization. A newly arrived Chechen is able to realize his religious needs not simply in Moscow's Historical Mosque, but in the community of his countrymen, who have occupied a separate niche within the unconsolidated Muslim space of the capital. Religious migrants from Central Asia likewise aim to adhere to the jamaat of their countrymen. Such a jamaat may be formed by migration processes and unite people who have come from the same village, who rent the same dwelling in Moscow, and who work in the same place. However, a jamaat is usually formed within the Moscow Muslim space – people get to know one another at the mosque at the alim's readings, through a *folk mulla*, during Koran reading classes¹² or visiting Qadiri dhikr.

Forming a sense of belonging through participating in a religious practice

It is precisely through this feeling of involvement in a particular community that the migrant's sense of belonging to the world of a particular mosque appears, as well as to the Moscow Muslim space as a whole. According to Christoph Wulf, community itself is a reason, process and consequence of the ritual practice that constructs, reproduces and stabilizes communal identity (Wulf 2004). So, the community and sense of belonging as well as collective identity are based on particular religious practices. These practices described above constitute the basis for the establishment of informal horizontal connections inside the disunited Muslim community of Moscow. Young Central Asian migrants feel the need for a teacher, adviser and spiritual guide who is not simply a co-religionist, but somebody with the same religious, cultural and social baggage as themselves. And, what is more important, with the same legal and social problems that the foreign migrants face on an everyday basis (Reeves 2013). The practice of consulting *folk mullas* builds for the migrant a sense of participation in a familiar kind of religious life while far from home. Thanks to the establishment of personal relationships with a *folk mulla* or an alim, the disunited and fragmentary space of the mosque takes on an individual character for the believer.

Ritual functions as a bridge between the inner experience of the individual and the external sociocultural world (Boudewijnse 2006: 135). Ritual contributes not only to the development of self-perception and the experience of identity, but also to the experience of unity with other people. The strong sense of solidarity and potential for mutual aid that are characteristic to the community of dhikrists transcend regional and social borders. Though the core of the community are the regular participants in the Qadiri ritual, these involve visitors from Chechnya and Ingushetiya into their social circle, as well as random participants, and members of their families. Dhikrists do not lose their ties with Caucasus, but rather, through the resources of the Moscow community, they consolidate these ties through organizing funerals of Moscow Sufis in

¹¹ Under the term *religious practice*, I refer not to the reading of the namaz, but to a collective spiritual practice requiring the immediate interaction of its participants.

¹² In the Cathedral Mosque, small Koran study groups emerge chaotically, their leaders becoming either “folk mullas” or alims.

their home republics, helping newcomers and enabling renowned Sufis living far away to deliver their sermons at a Moscow mosque.

Producing the space and ethnicization of Moscow Muslim life

Migrants bring into the Moscow Muslim space those religious institutions which are widespread in their homeland – whether this be the regular dhikr of the Qadiri tariqa or the practice of recourse to *folk mullas*. In this way, regional religious practices enable the “domestication” and ethnicization of Moscow Muslim space. The practices do not simply satisfy the spiritual needs of believers, but reconcile them to the Moscow religious environment.

The notion that religious practice changes space is quite popular in migration studies. Through the chanting of the dhikr, British Pakistanis islamize the urban places where they have settled and the towns and cities that are now their homes (Werbner 1996); through the regular Murid Parade the Senegalese migrants in New York occupy public space confirming their presence and thereby becoming part of the city (Salzbrunn 2004). But practice not only changes space, it produces space, to use Lefebvre’s expression. Lectures delivered by Central Asian speakers and ritual conducted by the *folk mullas* produce a new space within the given urban Muslim space. The religious practices that engage Central Asian migrants reflect their perception of faith, order and tradition, creating a Central Asian space in the Moscow mosque that is expressed in possibilities (a migrant can always approach a speaker or mulla and ask them about anything), ties (people start establishing contacts within the space created by religious practices) and visibility (anybody, especially after *jum’ah namaz*, can observe the intensification of non-official regionally-oriented religious life with its Central Asian actors).

Twice a week, the basement of the Historical Mosque becomes a purely Vainakh space. According to the murids, they feel proud that there are regular sermons in Chechen language and Sufi dhikr in the central Moscow mosque, “the same as at home”. All the more so considering the hostile attitude towards dhikr from the wider Muslim environment and general Russian islamophobia and Chechenophobia – all these factors make the “legal” production of Vainakh space a means of providing the Vainakh presence in Moscow with confirmation and legitimacy.

Forming a Moscow dimension of identity

I conclude, using Beaumont’s and Baker’s terminology, that the religious participants “move from spaces of *belonging* to spaces of ‘*becoming*’ in ways... that allow them to become (or develop) a new identity forged out of a number of different and sometimes competing and existing identities” (Baker and Beaumont 2011: 34). Religious practices construct and reproduce identity. They do not merely form the believer’s identity as a murid and Sufi. The migrant becomes a member of a Moscow jamaat, attends a Moscow mosque, and creates a social circle around himself consisting of Moscow residents. Thus these practices also form the migrant’s Moscow dimension of identity.

Acknowledgements This study was carried out as part of the Basic Research Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE). Translation into English was done by the author and Benjamin Lee McGarr. I am grateful to my informants and reviewers. I wish to thank Ekaterina Demintseva, Akhmet Yarlykapov, Igor Savin, Vladimir Bobrovnikov for their intellectual guidance.

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