

ROZALIYA GARİPOVA

# Transformation of a Mosque into a Shrine

## The Role of Material Culture, Sacred Stories and a Female Shrine Keeper in Preserving Islamic Life in Soviet and Post-Soviet Kazakhstan<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This paper analyzes oral narratives which developed around a mosque in northeastern Kazakhstan and the role that these narratives and the building of the mosque played in the resilience and survival of Islam in the Soviet and post-Soviet times. The mosque is in the village of Akkulsk not far from the city of Semey. It was built around 1905, was repurposed as a school and club under Soviet rule and subsequently was neglected in the later Soviet period when the inhabitants of the village of Akkulsk moved away. Despite its physical decay, people continued to treat the mosque building as a sacred object. I suggest that oral narratives played an important role in turning the Akkulsk mosque into a shrine as well as enabling its survival. The main protagonist circulating the sacred narratives is an elderly woman who had been a keeper of the mosque when everyone else in the village had left. The article explores how sacred narratives are interconnected with gender and female authority and with the collective memory of the former village community. This case helps us rethink the role of the mosque as a place of worship, the forms of Islamic religiosity in the post-Soviet period and the impact of Soviet rule on Islam in Kazakhstan.

### Keywords

Sacred narratives / post-Soviet Islam / Kazakhstan / material culture / female religious authority

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### Introduction

In May 2018 a group of researchers investigating the sacred geography of Kazakhstan, including myself, drove approximately forty kilometers from the city of Semey towards Pavlodar on the M-38 highway in the open steppe and found the dilapidated remains of the Akkulska mosque, in its eponymous village of just a couple of households. Neither the village nor the mosque can be said to have been functioning entities. The village, which was founded by Tatar Muslim settlers in the nineteenth century, had gradually been abandoned during the Soviet period following the dissolution of the kolkhoz, while the Soviet authorities had closed the mosque between the late 1920s to early 1930s and subsequently utilized the building as a school and club. During the later Soviet period, the mosque had fallen into disrepair, with the roof, doors, and windows all missing, and its minaret leaning precariously, as if it was about to take its last breath. Despite this bleak situation, the descendants of the former inhabitants of the village, who now lived in Semey or other cities and villages of Kazakhstan, along with other visitors who had heard stories about the mosque and its mystical powers that allowed it to withstand the steppe winds, continued to visit the site. They came to touch its wooden walls and seek blessings. More significantly, the mosque had become a symbol of Kazakhstan's Islamic legacy and national heritage. The fate of the mosque became a subject of intense debate among the Tatar community of Semey, local ethnographers, and regional authorities who suggested either moving the mosque to an open-air ethnographic museum in the city of Uskemen or rebuilding it *in situ*.

The present study aims to explore the ways in which Islam has developed and evolved on the Kazakh steppe during the post-Soviet period. It focuses on the analysis of oral narratives that developed around the Akkulska mosque, and their role in the mosque's resilience and survival. Recent studies on Islam in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods examine the various ways in which Islamic institutions and practices have continued to survive in the post-Soviet era, including the role of sacred and mystical narratives in that survival.<sup>2</sup> Paolo Sartori has emphasized the continued importance of shrine visiting and the transmission of oral narratives about holy figures and their miracles during the Soviet period.<sup>3</sup> These shrines, he

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<sup>2</sup> For such an analysis in pre-modern period see: DEWEESE 2000, 353–376.

<sup>3</sup> SARTORI 2019, 399.

argues, functioned as sites for the circulation of Sufi narratives and represented a collective “memory space” that contributed to the construction of Muslim identity.<sup>4</sup> Allen Frank’s *Gulag Miracles* provides insight into the role of sacred lineages and the ways in which Muslims responded to totalitarianism by circulating mystical stories and narratives about holy figures and their miracles in the Gulag camps.<sup>5</sup> The present study explores how mystical narratives interacted with the Akkulsk mosque and the individuals who built and maintained it, even when it was reduced to its shell.

The Akkulsk mosque stands at the nexus of several contradictions. First, while mosques have historically and traditionally served a range of functions within a Muslim community, such as a place for people to attend daily or Friday prayers, listen to a khutba, take religious education or consult an imam, the mosque in Akkulsk does not serve any of these functions. However, people visit the Akkulsk mosque for rather different purposes, and mostly as a shrine and as a beloved relic of a past of once a prosperous Tatar village and community on the Kazakh steppe. Second, while many old mosques were rebuilt and reopened right after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Akkulsk mosque remained in a deplorable and sorrowful state for decades as if testing the resilience of Islam in the form of material culture. In fact, however, the dilapidated state of the building is belied by the vibrancy of the mystical narratives that continue to circulate about it. The narratives themselves serve as the *raison d’être* for the mosque’s existence. Oral narratives played an important role in turning the Akkulsk mosque into a shrine, and thereby reconceiving it as a numinous site of spiritual authority.

Oral narratives associated with the Akkulsk mosque include three types of stories. The first body of stories relate to the historical and “glorious” pre-Soviet past of the village and the Akkulsk mosque and its imams as part of the larger Tatar community around Semey. The sacred status that the mosque enjoys is largely a product of communal memory. The second body of narratives are about the decline of both the village and of the mosque building during the Soviet period. These stories combine narratives about the closure of the mosque by Soviet authorities and movement of people to the neighboring village of Zhylandy and narratives about how the mosque underwent decay but nevertheless miraculously survived. The third group of narratives are told by its keeper Gulshira who has spread the narratives about the survival of the building and her role as the keeper of the mosque in the post-Soviet period. She played an important role in the reconceptualization of the mosque as a shrine.

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<sup>4</sup> SARTORI 2019, 387.

<sup>5</sup> FRANK 2019.

Ultimately, the story about the Akkulsk mosque is about the creation of a sacred space, or a process of hierotopy, to borrow a term coined by the Russian art historian Alexei Lidov.<sup>6</sup> Lidov proposed this term to explain the creation of sacred spaces as a special form of human creativity, often conscious, but sometimes spontaneous. In the case of Akkulsk mosque, we can trace the creation of a sacred space, mostly unintended, through three elements: first, through a collective memory about the past of the village and its mosque and its religious scholars; second, through a circulation of mystical and sacred narratives about the mosque; and third, through the agency of a female figure who assumed the role of shrine-keeper of this mosque. One of the ways in which Islam survived into the post-Soviet period was exactly through the creation of sacred spaces such as this. I argue that the Akkulsk mosque is a noteworthy example of a religious object undergoing transformation from a mosque into a shrine, through narratives that established the mosque as a space for collective memory. The existence of the shrine is inextricably linked to the role of the *shyrakshy*, or shrine keeper, who asserts her religious authority through her narratives that connect her to the mosque and its founder. This metamorphosis not only attests to the resilience of Islamic traditions in the Soviet and post-Soviet era, but also underscores the pivotal role played by women in the survival of Islam.

This study is based on a series of interviews which I and my colleagues conducted during two trips within the framework of a project on the Sacred Geography of Kazakhstan.<sup>7</sup> I conducted two interviews with the keeper of the mosque Gulshira Saydakhmetqizi Sapariyeva in her house in Akkulsk in May 2018 and in May 2019.<sup>8</sup> During both trips I also conducted interviews with the leading elders of the Tatar community in Semey at the city's Tatar Cultural Center, as well as with the extended Fazyzbekov family. The reminiscences and the family archive of the Fazyzbekovs are important because they provide information about their ancestor, Mutallap Sultangaliughli Fazyzbekov, who built the current building of the mosque between 1904 and 1907, and provide the list of imams who served in this community up until the end of the Soviet period.<sup>9</sup> Two interviews, one with

<sup>6</sup> LIDOV 2006, 32–58.

<sup>7</sup> TSYREMPILOV et al. 2022, 704–721.

<sup>8</sup> The interviews were over 6 hours in total. I conducted the interviews in the Tatar language which was at times heavily influenced by Kazakh. I am grateful to Ulan Bigozhin for helping me decipher her speech.

<sup>9</sup> The Fazyzbekovs are an extended family whose member Mutallap Sultangaliughli Fazyzbekov built the mosque that stands today in Akkulsk. I am grateful to the Fazyzbekov family for sharing information from their family archive. Mutallap Sultangaliughli Fazyzbekov's daughter Zakira Mutallapqizi took notes from the diaries of her father and her grandfathers (*ättäm babaylarimniñ kondälegendän*). The notes, which are referred

the Head of the Local Historical Society of Priirtysh'ye (Kraevedcheskogo Obshchestva Priirtysh'ye) in Semey, Marat Erkimbekovich Sasanov, and the second with a Semey local historian, Mikhail Ibragimovich Situda, also add important insight to the story.<sup>10</sup> During my second trip I was also able to stop by a neighboring village, Zhylandy, and had a long conversation with Rufiya Khaibullina, a member of the Fazylbekov family on her mother's side. Lastly, I consulted several civil registry books (*metricheskie knigi*) of the village of Akkul'sk, from the 1830s until 1915, which are located at the State Historical Archive of the Republic of Bashkortostan in Ufa.

### **Historical Narratives and Collective Memory: The Akkul'sk Mosque and Its Religious Scholars**

The Akkul'sk mosque is situated in the village of Akkul'sk, which is located 40 kilometers away from the city of Semey. It is an integral part of the history of Tatar Muslim religious institutions in the northeastern Kazakh steppe. The origins of the Tatar-Bashkir Muslim community in Semipalatinsk (the original Russian name of Semey) and its surrounding areas can be traced back to the second half of the eighteenth century, during the expansion of the Russian Empire to the east. Semipalatinsk was established as a fort on the Irtysh line and quickly became an important administrative, political, and economic center. Its strategic location at the junction of trade routes made it one of the major trade hubs connecting Russia with Central Asia, China, Mongolia, and Tibet.<sup>11</sup> Beginning in the late eighteenth century, Semipalatinsk attracted a large migration of Central Asians (Sarts), Russians, and various categories of Tatars. These individuals were drawn to the Kazakh steppe for a variety of reasons: some were engaged in trade, others sought to evade military service or a heavy tax burden, and others still were adventurers looking to try their luck.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, many Kazakhs began to settle around Semipalatinsk, forming Kazakh mahallas. The first half of the nineteenth century witnessed a larger wave of migration from inner Russia, leading to a significant increase in population. This growth ultimately led to the city's designation as the center of the Semipalatinsk oblast' in 1854.<sup>13</sup>

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to as *Zakira's notes* throughout this article, are dated from 16 April 1991. She also noted on page 3 that she consulted two documents (*papka*) devoted to the villages of Akkul'sk and Bashkul from the archive of Oblispolkom (*Oblispolkom arhivi*). The family members say that they do not have the diary and claim that it is lost.

<sup>10</sup> I thank Nikolay Tsyrempilov for conducting these interviews.

<sup>11</sup> FRANK & USMANOV 2001, 7.

<sup>12</sup> SHABLEI 2013, 13–14.

<sup>13</sup> SHABLEI 2013, 17.

As the Russian Empire consolidated its rule in the east, Semipalatinsk evolved into one of the largest and most influential Islamic religious and educational centers in the region. This was reflected in the growth of the Tatar quarter (Tatarskaia sloboda) and the construction of numerous mosques and madrasas. Throughout the nineteenth century, the number of mahallas and mosques in the city expanded rapidly, and at its peak, Semipalatinsk supported eleven mosques and nine madrasas by the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>14</sup> Histories of Muslim religious scholars and institutions in Semipalatinsk attest to how the city's scholars and Sufis played an important role in established Islamic scholarly networks that connected religious experts from the Volga-Ural region, Central Asia, and Chinese Turkestan. The madrasas in the city attracted students from all over the eastern Kazakh steppe and supplied religious scholars to different parts of the region.<sup>15</sup>

As an extension of this process, Bashkirs and Tatars also began to move to the countryside to engage in agriculture. According to Bakyt Atantayeva and Raushan Akhmetova, after the 1840s, Tatars, who were exiled to the eastern frontiers of Russia as military recruits, began to settle in and around Semipalatinsk.<sup>16</sup> Pavel Shablei notes that “runaway Muslims (*beglye tatory*)” also constituted a part of the population and were hiding on the Kazakh steppe.<sup>17</sup> Some of them acquired the status of *chala-kazakh* through intermarriage with the local Kazakhs or managed to be registered by Russian authorities as such. *Chala* meant “half” and referred to the descendants of Muslims who had migrated to the Kazakh steppe and married to Kazakhs or to people who themselves possessed *chala-kazakh* status. Although *chala-kazakhs* did not enter the patrilineal Kazakh kinship system (at least in the first generation), the Russian authorities considered them as part of the nomadic population, which gave them certain privileges.<sup>18</sup> In this way, they were exempted from paying the poll tax and from military service and other duties.<sup>19</sup> There thus emerged a number of Tatar villages not far from Semipalatinsk – Bashkul, Akkultik<sup>20</sup> (Akkulsk), Karamorza, Iziatulla, Absaliyam, Zubair, Sary Nogai, Pukur (Buker)<sup>21</sup> and a few

<sup>14</sup> FRANK & USMANOV 2001, 1.

<sup>15</sup> FRANK & USMANOV 2001, 1.

<sup>16</sup> ATANTAYEVA & AKHMETOVA 2018, 518.

<sup>17</sup> SHABLEI 2013, 13, 32.

<sup>18</sup> KHĀLIDĪ 2005, ix–x.

<sup>19</sup> SHABLEI 2013, 32.

<sup>20</sup> Akkultik refers to a branch of a river which dried out. Interview with Gulshira Sapariyeva, Akkulsk, 17 May 2018 and 16 May 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Frank suggests that Pukur may correspond to Pavlodar. I think that it most probably refers to the village of Buker. FRANK & USMANOV 2001, 36 (footnote 84).

more.<sup>22</sup> Histories of Semipalatinsk (Semey) by Ahmad Wali al-Qazani and Qurban 'Ali Khalidi provide detailed descriptions of the growth of Muslim mahallas, mosques and a network of religious scholars in the city, but they hardly mention anything about the Tatar-Bashkir villages around the city except for their names. They only briefly mention that in the vicinity of the city there were three Muslim villages – Akkultik (Akkulsk), Bashkul, and Pukur – and that these three villages had mosques.<sup>23</sup>

During my second trip to Semey in 2019, I had the privilege of meeting the extended family of Fazyzbekovs who told the initial narratives on the construction of the Akkulsk mosque. Their account was primarily based on the notes found in the diary of their deceased relative, Zakira Mutallapqizi. The Fazyzbekov family highlighted three of its members as central to the story of the Akkulsk mosque. According to their narrative, the village of Akkulsk was founded by Nigmatulla Saifullaughli Fazyzbek in 1812.<sup>24</sup> Nigmatulla's father may have arrived in the Semipalatinsk region from Kazan province in the late eighteenth century, fleeing military conscription.<sup>25</sup> Although Zakira's notes did not specify when the first mosque was constructed, according to *The Register of Mosques (Vedomost' o mechetiakh)* the Akkulsk mosque was built in 1851.<sup>26</sup>

While one member of the Fazyzbekov family is considered to be the founder of the Akkulsk village, another member, Sultangali Fazyzbekov, is credited for constructing the current building of the Akkulsk mosque, which has survived in a dilapidated state to this day.<sup>27</sup> Open sources, newspaper articles, and information provided by the Fazyzbekov family members suggest that Sultangali Fazyzbekov (1847–1912) began construction of the mosque after his return from the *hajj* in 1904 or 1905.<sup>28</sup> The family

<sup>22</sup> According to one of the leading elders of the Semey Tatar community Faizullin Shaukat Garifovich, there were around twelve Tatar villages around Semipalatinsk.

<sup>23</sup> FRANK & USMANOV 2001, 36.

<sup>24</sup> MUTALLAPQIZI 1991.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Fazyzbekova (Salikhova) Saniya Aubakirovna, Akhunzhanov Gabdelhak Gabdullovich, Faizullin Shaukat Garifovich (and other members of the extended Fazyzbekov family), 15 May 2019. There is no corroborative evidence for this claim of the Fazyzbekovs about the establishment of the village in the late eighteenth century.

<sup>26</sup> VEDOMOST', 885.

<sup>27</sup> The family history is important because it was an extended family: there are many tombstones of members of the Fazyzbekov family in the graveyard of the village. Today, there are still many descendants of the Fazyzbekov family who live in Semey and who are concerned for the survival of the mosque. We need to underline how the continued significance of the mosque is intertwined with this family history.

<sup>28</sup> <https://e-history.kz/ru/news/show/5716/>; [https://express-k.kz/news/ekskursiya/vremya\\_sobirat\\_kamni\\_tak\\_i\\_ne\\_nastupilo\\_dlya\\_derevyannoy\\_mecheti\\_v\\_sele\\_akkol-132218](https://express-k.kz/news/ekskursiya/vremya_sobirat_kamni_tak_i_ne_nastupilo_dlya_derevyannoy_mecheti_v_sele_akkol-132218) (accessed 25 July 2020). The same story is also told by the inhabitants of Semey and members of the Fazyzbekov family.

suggested that the construction of the mosque may have been linked to Sultangali's personal religious "reawakening" which was associated with his pilgrimage to Mecca. Although there is no information about what had happened to the earlier mosque building, it may well have been destroyed in a fire, a common fate for many of the wooden mosques in Semipalatinsk.<sup>29</sup>

Zakira's notes indicate that the mosque was built between 1904 and 1907 by Sultangali Fazyzbek's son, Mutallap (1874–1937),<sup>30</sup> who was put in charge of construction by a certain Wali haji from Semipalatinsk, who financed the mosque. The new building was most likely funded by a Tatar merchant of Semipalatinsk, Mukhammad Wali Khamitov,<sup>31</sup> who was a member of the city's affluent entrepreneurial circle.<sup>32</sup> *The Register of Mosques* reveals that Ghabdel-Mutallap Sultangaliughli Fazyzbekov was the village head (*aulnyi*) of Akkul'sk in 1906 and held documents about the mosque and its imams.<sup>33</sup> When the mosque was completed, Khamitov presented Mutallap with a table and six chairs as a symbol of his gratitude for his efforts.<sup>34</sup> The Fazyzbekovs were evidently surprised to learn that Zakira's documents indicate that it was Mutallap rather than Sultangali who built the mosque, and they suggested that most probably both of them were involved in its construction.<sup>35</sup> This discrepancy between the family archive and common knowledge on the identity of the constructor of the mosque may be because of the stories that Gulshira Saydakhmetqizi, the keeper of the mosque, tells about the mosque and her efforts to sanctify the personality of Sultangali – a subject that will be discussed further below.

<sup>29</sup> Buildings of several mosques in Semipalatinsk were destroyed in fire and were rebuilt. See: KASHLIAK 2004, chapter "Musul'manskie mecheti i ikh sviashchennosluzhiteli".

<sup>30</sup> Sultangali Fazyzbekov had five children, among whom Mutallap was the eldest son. Mutallapqizi's notes tell that Mutallap Sultangaliughli was born on 15 December 1874 in Akkul'sk and died on 14 July 1937, at the age of 63. He was buried in the old graveyard (*iske zirat*) of Semey. He had primary education according to the Islamic and Russian curriculum in the village of Kanonerka. Despite his limited education, he was smart and intelligent and was considered as one of the elders of the village of Akkul'sk; the village folks had deep respect for him.

<sup>31</sup> The museum of the Tatar Cultural Center at Semey preserves a picture of Mukhammad Wali Khamitov and his family (ill. 2). Mutallapqizi's notes also identify Khamitov as a person who invested his money for the construction of the mosque. MUTALLAPQIZI 1991, 4.

<sup>32</sup> MUTALLAPQIZI 1991.

<sup>33</sup> O MECHETIAKH.

<sup>34</sup> MUTALLAPQIZI 1991.

<sup>35</sup> During the interview, when Saniya Aubakirovna started reading the notes of Zakira, she was surprised to find out that it was actually Mutallap who constructed the mosque. She even exclaimed, "Oh, even *we* didn't know this!"

The history of this mosque is closely tied to the religious scholars who served there, as is often the case with many other mosques. Zakira's notes provide a list of the seven imams who served at the mosque up until the end of the Soviet period, with Rashid Fazyzbekov being the last imam on the list. Rashid is the third family member in this genealogy, as indicated by Zakira's notes. The list serves as a valuable evidence for the continuation of Islamic practice during the Soviet regime, demonstrating that mullas performed religious rituals despite the mosque not officially functioning.

We can corroborate and correct this information about the sequence of religious scholars who served at the Akkul'sk mosque by checking the civil registries for Akkul'sk village.<sup>36</sup> The registries first started to be kept in 1836, when imperial authorities tightened the record-keeping requirements for the Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly and the Muslim regions under its jurisdiction. The Assembly officials began keeping systematic journals of its meetings (*zhurnaly zasedanii*) in the same year. Since the Akkul'sk mosque was constructed only in 1851, imams of neighboring villages or imams from Semipalatinsk initially kept the registries for the Akkul'sk village parishioners. This practice continued even after the construction of the Akkul'sk mosque. In the 1837 civil registry, a licensed imam from Semipalatinsk named Ghaisa Ibrahimughli is recorded as having performed funerals and marriages for the inhabitants of Akkul'sk. In 1866, Akkul'sk acquired its own licensed (*ukazli*) mulla Ghabid Ghabderrahimughli. In 1874, the mulla of the village of Bashkul Ghabbas Iskhaqughli performed religious rites for the people of Akkul'sk. From 1885 to 1896 a licensed imam, Jamaledin Sirajeddinughli, held the position of the imam of the Akkul'sk mosque.<sup>37</sup> Between 1901 and 1905 the licensed imam of the Bashkul village Muhammad Zarif Musin kept the records for the Akkul'sk village.<sup>38</sup> In 1906, Bakhriraz Ghabdelhadiughli became the imam-khatib and mudarris of the Akkul'sk mosque and took over the responsibility for keeping the civil registry books.<sup>39</sup> The civil registry for 1911 demonstrates that he still retained these responsibilities that year.<sup>40</sup> The civil registry for

<sup>36</sup> The Central State Historical Archive of the Republic of Bashkortostan (TsGIA RB) contains registers of the village of Akkul'sk starting in 1836 and up until 1915, except for some years. I am grateful to Madiyar Nasyrov for sharing the registries for 1837 (f. 295, op. 9, d. 683), 1866 (op. 9, d. 1051), 1874 (op. 9, d. 1055), 1885 (op. 9, d. 677), and 1896 (op. 9, d. 1065). I also have civil registries for 1893 (op. 9, d. 1063), 1905 (op. 12, d. 83), 1907 (op. 12, d. 84a), 1911 (op. 12, d. 88), and 1915 (op. 9, d. 90).

<sup>37</sup> We can see his name in the civil registry for 1893 too. METRICHESKAIA 1893.

<sup>38</sup> METRICHESKAIA 1905.

<sup>39</sup> METRICHESKAIA 1907.

<sup>40</sup> METRICHESKAIA 1911.

1915 indicates Salimjan Ashrafullahughli Fayzullin as the imam of the Akkulsksk mosque.<sup>41</sup>

Zakira's notes list Jamaledin Sirajeddinughli as the second imam of the Akkulsksk mosque, and identify Kemaleddin Mukhammad Rakhimughli as the imam before him. The third imam on the list was Bakhriraz Ghabdelhadiughli, who came from Kazan in 1904 and went back to Kazan in 1912.<sup>42</sup> Mosque registers (*vedomosti*) show that he was born in 1858 in Menzelinsk township of Kazan guberniya and studied in the Chakmak madrasa and in the madrasa of Shihabeddin Marjani in Kazan.<sup>43</sup> He was officially approved as imam in December of 1905.<sup>44</sup> Salimjan Ashrafughli, from Kazan province, succeeded him from 1912 to 1925. The mosque registers indicate that Salimjan Fayzullin studied in the Sterlitamak madrasa and was approved as the imam of this mosque on March 10, 1914.<sup>45</sup> The statement about this mosque also mentions that in 1921 Abdullatif Ismagilov Akzigitov was appointed as muazzin.<sup>46</sup>

The fifth imam, Mukhammad Zarif Ghaliakbarughli Musin, was a local scholar from the village of Bashkul, serving from 1925 to 1929.<sup>47</sup> In 1929 he was sentenced to five years' imprisonment and his property was confiscated during the campaign of dekulakization. The sixth mulla, according to Zakira's notes, was Shakir Waliughli Galiev. It was noted that he was a local resident (*bu aul keshese*). Most probably, he was Shakir Ghaifullaughli Khaibullin.<sup>48</sup> He came to Akkulsksk when he was a child and later married a Tatar woman who lived in the village. His granddaughter Rufiya Khaibullina told me that Shakir graduated from a madrasa in Semipalatinsk and was very knowledgeable in Islamic tradition. We do not know exactly when he began to perform the duties of imam, most likely before the war, but there is information that he continued to fulfill the duties of imam almost right up until he moved to the neighboring village of Zhylandy in 1967. The seventh and the last imam on the list was Rashid Ghabdullaughli Fazyzbekov,

<sup>41</sup> METRICHESKAIA 1915.

<sup>42</sup> MUTALLAPQIZI 1991, 4.

<sup>43</sup> O MECHETIAKH.

<sup>44</sup> O MECHETIAKH.

<sup>45</sup> O MECHETIAKH.

<sup>46</sup> VEDOMOST', 885.

<sup>47</sup> Mutallapqizi notes that this imam was her father's brother-in-law, MUTALLAPQIZI 1991.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Rufiya Khaibullina, Zhylandy, 16 May 2019 and 4 July 2020. Rufiya Khaibullina was granddaughter of Shakir (her paternal grandfather). She is a native of Akkulsksk. Her mother, Fakiya Fazyzbekova, belonged to the Fazyzbekov family. Shakir's daughter, Hadicha (d. 2016), was knowledgeable about religious practices and was known to be an abistay.

Zakira's brother, who served as imam from 1974 to 1989.<sup>49</sup> According to Rufiya's recollections, a certain Husayn babay conducted Eid prayers after Rashid, but "there was nobody after him; he conducted the last Eid prayers".<sup>50</sup>

The information in these documents suggests a remarkable and uninterrupted continuity of the Volga-Ural scholarly tradition in the Kazakh steppe.<sup>51</sup> For one thing, there was an ongoing exchange of ulama and scholarly traditions between Kazan province and Semipalatinsk region, even in its rural areas, as well as between Akkul'sk and other Tatar villages and the city of Semipalatinsk. Another remarkable continuity is an ongoing succession of religious figures between the imperial and Soviet period, as if the 1917 revolution did not happen. However, the Soviet transformation would affect the life of the village in the late 1920s and soon thereafter the mosque would be repurposed for non-religious functions. These changes are reflected in the second set of narratives about the Akkul'sk mosque and the survival of its building under the Soviet regime.

### **The Soviet Rule and the Appearance of Mystical Stories and Narratives about the Mosque**

As with many other mosques in eastern Kazakhstan, the Akkul'sk mosque was affected by the consolidation of Soviet rule. In the early 1930s, the mosque building was closed, and the crescent was removed from its minaret. The mosque building was repurposed as a school and a social club (*dom kul'tury*) where propaganda films were screened. The village was transformed into a Soviet kolkhoz which provided a new framework for the survival of the Muslim community. As demonstrated in *Allah's Kolkhozes*, a collective volume edited by Stéphane Dudoignon and Christian Noack, Islam dynamically interacted with the Soviet system and was shaped by political, socioeconomic, and demographic changes.<sup>52</sup> Soviet kolkhoz provided resources for the existence and continuity of Muslim mahalla in rural Central Asia.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, with the establishment of the kolkhoz named after Iosif Stalin, the Muslim life of the Akkul'sk community continued within the framework of this Soviet institution.

<sup>49</sup> Rashid was Zakira's brother and came to Akkul'sk from Semipalatinsk in 1974. According to Rufiya Khaibullina, when Rashid came to Akkul'sk, there were already just a few houses left and he was largely engaged in installing tombstones at the village cemetery.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Rufiya Khaibullina, Zhylandy, 16 May 2019, 4 July 2020.

<sup>51</sup> For such exchange between scholars in the Volga-Ural region and those in the Kazakh steppe, see ROSS 2020.

<sup>52</sup> DUDOIGNON & NOACK 2014, 10.

<sup>53</sup> DUDOIGNON & NOACK 2014, 35.

With the relaxation of Soviet antireligious policies during and after WWII, the establishment of SADUM and the cooperation of Muslim authorities and state institutions, Islamic practice became permissible – under strict state control – in the central cities of the USSR, such as Moscow, while in rural areas it continued to exist more openly due to a less strict state supervision.<sup>54</sup> One such example is the village of Akkul'sk. Even though the mosque stopped functioning as such, Shakir mulla continued to perform Qur'anic recitals (*hatem ütkarü*), funeral prayers, Eid prayers and other rituals. According to Rufiya Khaibullina, religious practices during the Soviet period continued relatively freely. Her grandfather was regularly invited to different gatherings for the Qur'anic recital in Akkul'sk and the neighboring Tatar villages of Zhylandy, Kananerka, and Karamorza, and he regularly conducted Eid prayers which were massive events that took place next to the graveyard. People came from Semipalatinsk and other nearby villages for such gatherings.<sup>55</sup> Despite the mosque's closure, religious life continued around the local cemetery which became a part of the sacred space. It is important to note that the Akkul'sk cemetery is an integral part of the larger sacred space of the former village with its mosque. All former inhabitants of the village are buried there, and the burial stones of many members of the extended Fazylbekov's family occupy a central place in the cemetery. The integral part of the cemetery in the sacred space around the Akkul'sk mosque was evident as the keeper of the mosque, Gulshira, took us to the cemetery, before leading us to the mosque.

Once the kolkhoz started dissolving in the 1960s, the residents of Akkul'sk gradually moved to the neighboring village of Zhylandy or to Semipalatinsk. Zhylandy, which had previously been a small village, grew rapidly and even had a boarding school. Since Akkul'sk only had an elementary school, many parents sent their children to Zhylandy for secondary education and eventually moved there. In the 1960s, after the collective farm disbanded, the Muslim community in Akkul'sk began to dwindle. By the 1970s, only a few houses remained, and the mosque building had deteriorated into a blackened and decaying wooden structure with a tilted minaret. Despite its state of decay, the mosque became increasingly revered, with tales of its resilience circulating throughout the Muslim community in the region around Semipalatinsk. These mystical stories have played a crucial role in shaping the perception and significance of the Akkul'sk mosque right down to the present day.

Paolo Sartori has emphasized the significance of shrines, stating that “[monumental sites] acquired meaning through an interpretive framework.

<sup>54</sup> TASAR 2011; DUDOIGNON & NOACK 2014; TASAR 2017; ZARIPOV & SAFAROV 2017; SARTORI 2019.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Rufiya Khaibullina.

And this framework ... was provided by Sufi narratives, i. e., stories about saints and their miracles.”<sup>56</sup> Allen Frank explains that the circulation of miracle narratives about holy figures during the Stalinist repression helped to sustain Islam in the Soviet period.<sup>57</sup> I propose that these miraculous tales not only preserved Islamic tradition and institutions but also allowed the Akkulsk mosque to continue existing even after it ceased to function as a mosque. It appears that the mosque’s *raison d’être* is rooted in the mystical stories that surround it. These stories relate to different aspects of the mosque, including its physical make-up, particular moments in its historical past, and its resilience in the face of both Soviet anti-religious campaigns and harsh weather conditions.

As buildings, mosques have historically fulfilled several different functions. They have been places where people participated in collective and individual prayer and listened to sermons. A mosque was a place where the transmission of religious knowledge took place, in the form of *halaqa* or scholarly discussions on issues of theology, law and mysticism. In modern times, mosques host a variety of different activities. In Russia and Central Asia, mosque visitors often request imams to read the Qur’an on behalf of the deceased. Marriage ceremonies for pious couples are held in mosque buildings. Children are enrolled in mosque-based summer camps. However, the Akkulsk mosque of the Soviet and post-Soviet period was different in this respect, as it no longer served practical functions. Instead, visitors came to the mosque to experience the sacred and the mystical. They would touch the wood of the mosque and ask for blessings. For many people the mosque served as a source of memories of their ancestors who lived in the village. Over time, as the village’s houses fell into dilapidation and became overgrown with bushes and grass, the mosque became organically intertwined with the surrounding landscape. Despite its old and decaying building, the Akkulsk mosque continues to evoke a supernatural reality. As one local newspaper put it, “The lonely mosque, standing forty kilometers away from Semipalatinsk, yields neither to the wind, nor time, nor to the changing political regimes”.<sup>58</sup>

The mystical stories surrounding the Akkulsk mosque amplify its significance in the eyes of visitors. One story suggests that the Soviet authorities repeatedly sought to demolish the mosque, but were thwarted in their attempts. In one instance, a man who was responsible for removing the crescent on its minaret lost his finger or hand, according to some versions.<sup>59</sup> Another story tells us that during the Soviet period, a resident of

<sup>56</sup> SARTORI 2019, 387.

<sup>57</sup> FRANK 2019.

<sup>58</sup> Arna, 18 July 2013.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Rufiya Khaibullina.

Akkulsk attempted to take away some wooden panels from the mosque but was found dead the next morning, hanged.<sup>60</sup> It is also said that the mosque was built without a single nail and that the pine wood used in its construction was of special quality, soaked in a special solution.<sup>61</sup> Such special construction methods allowed the building to withstand the harsh steppe winds and cold. The source for the stories about the specialty of the wood may be imperial insignia, which are still visible today on all the remaining logs of the building.<sup>62</sup>

The head of the local historians' society, Marat Erkimbekovich, shared his personal experience of the mosque. When he visited the village many years ago, the Akkulsk inhabitants advised him against entering the mosque due to the presence of a ghost, a woman in white clothes, who protected the building. However, Sasanov and his group went inside and examined the building. That night, he had a dream in which he saw an old woman in white clothes floating in the air inside the mosque. She politely asked him not to enter the mosque anymore and then knocked him down at a high speed. He thereafter determined to respect the spirit's request, and refrained from entering the building. He also noted that the spirit of the mosque was fighting for the building and giving signs in this way, and that it was not a good idea to move the mosque to the open-air museum in Uskemen.<sup>63</sup> For the people, this mosque was a holy site.<sup>64</sup> These stories are repeated and sometimes contradicted by another set of narratives which are circulated by the mosque keeper, Gulshira Sapariyeva.

### **The Female Mosque-Keeper and the Creation of Sacred Narratives**

The most important figure in the creation of this sacred space from the decaying building of the mosque is an elderly woman named Gulshira Saydakhmetqizi Sapariyeva. Although she does not claim any religious authority, she has assumed an important mission for herself and plays a crucial role in maintaining this mosque and its environment as a sacred space. In the Kazakh steppe and Central Eurasia, some women were famous as *abistays* and *otins*, or female teachers of religious knowledge.<sup>65</sup> However, this example of the female mosque-keeper is quite unique.

<sup>60</sup> Arna, 18 July 2013.

<sup>61</sup> Arna, 18 July 2013.

<sup>62</sup> Madiyar Nasyrov shared with me this information and the photos of the imperial insignia on the logs.

<sup>63</sup> Uskemen is the current name of the city of Ust'-Kamenogorsk and one proposal was to move the building of the mosque there.

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Marat Erkimbekovich Sasanov, May 16, 2018.

<sup>65</sup> On *abistays* and *otins*, see GARİPOVA 2016 and 2022, 35–71; KEFELI 2014; FRANK 2001, 224–226; KAMP 2006, esp. chapter 4: "Otin and the Soviet school", and 2010, 503–531;

Gulshira was born into a Tatar family in 1941 as the fifth and the last child. Her father, a native of Buker, Saydahmet Izmailov, left for the front as a soldier (*riadovoi*) when Gulshira was two weeks old and died in battle in 1943. Her mother, Gulsumjamal, was a *chala-kazakh* born into the family of a Tatar mother named Gaynelhayat and a Kazakh father. Gulshira was raised and lived her entire life in this village. She was familiar with the mosque building since her early childhood; she initially studied at an elementary school located within the mosque building, and later was involved in the administration of the social club (*dom kul'tury*), where she showed films and checked out books from its library for her fellow villagers. "I grew up here, studied and worked here, got married and had my children here, and now I am getting old here," she says. In the last two decades, she has also taken on the role of the keeper of the mosque and has acquired a widespread renown as such. When descendants of the deceased natives of Akkulska come to visit the graves of their relatives, or when random visitors come to look at the mosque, they usually visit her, and she takes them to the mosque and graveyard, and reads the Qur'an for the souls of their deceased ancestors, *arwakhs*.<sup>66</sup>

Gulshira's authority as the guardian of the mosque is striking, as she carefully maintains the existence of this sacred space. All her narratives revolve around justifying her role as its protector, and she does so by connecting herself to Sultangali Fazylbek. Her authority is established through the telling of sacred stories that detail her personal journey towards becoming a devout religious person. When I asked about her religiosity and her connection to the mosque, Gulshira described a poignant experience. "I did not live a religious life," she explained, "Neither my husband nor I fulfilled any religious obligations. I had never read the Qur'an or performed prayers (*namaz*)." She then recounted the tragic death of her son, which left her feeling lost and disconnected from life. On the 40<sup>th</sup> day after the death of her son, while visiting her sister, something strange occurred. "While I was walking, somebody hit me on the shoulder. When I turned around, I did not see anybody. I got very scared, began to sweat and suddenly began to recite some words, which I did not understand at that time: these were the words of *shahada* [profession of faith] and *at-tahiyyat* [salutation to God and the Prophet]."<sup>67</sup> She immediately called a mulla whom she knew to explain what had happened, and he was surprised by her sudden recitation of these sacred words. From that point on, Gulshira began reciting these words wherever she went, feeling that they had been miraculously revealed to her (*mina kondi*). She eventually shared this experience with another

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FATHI 1997, 27–43; GUSEVA 2012; KRÄMER 2001.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with Gulshira Sapariyeva, Akkulska, May 17, 2018 and May 16, 2019.

<sup>67</sup> *Tashahhud* prayer is read during the daily prayer and contains *shahada*.

religious woman, who was amazed by Gulshira's knowledge of the sacred words that took her months to learn. "And then," Gulshira added, "I made my resolution to be pious, I started performing prayers (*shunda niyet dastadym, namaz dastadim*)."<sup>68</sup>

Although Gulshira emphasizes that her knowledge is providential and not of her own agency, she also acknowledges the influence of her Tatar great-grandmother, Shamshilbayan. As mentioned above, her mother was born into a *chala-kazakh* family: her father was Kazakh, her mother Gulsumzhamal was Tatar. She was not religious, but Gulshira's maternal grandmother, Gainelkhayat, could read some prayers, having learned them from Shamshilbayan. Gulshira remembers how her great-grandmother closed the curtains tight and performed prayers at night so that nobody from outside could see her, how she made her and other children recite after her the letters of the Arabic alphabet, and how she made them recite "*kulhualla* [Surah al-Ihlas]"<sup>69</sup> before sleep. She also recalled that there was no clock in their house and that her grandmother determined the time for prayer by looking at the sun.<sup>70</sup>

Gulshira connects her strong religious spirit with her great-grandmother Shamshilbayan, who was a religious authority in her family and in the village. Coming from Ufa province, she taught religious knowledge to other women of Bashkul (*sabak birep yorde*). She was able to read Arabic-script material and taught people how to read and recite the Qur'an. Gulshira, in fact, describes the village of Bashkul as a village "with many knowledgeable people", claiming that "there were many mullas there", and that her great-grandmother was among the most knowledgeable. When I asked her if Shamshilbayan was an *abistay*, she confirmed that she was indeed one. According to Gulshira's story, Shamshilbayan also made a prediction:

One daughter of my nine daughters will read the Qur'an well (*minem tughiz kizimniñ ber kizi äybät ukir*). So, my great-grandmother's spirit (*arwakh*) transmitted to me (*arwakhı miña küchkän*); she had a very strong spirit and I inherited it from her.<sup>71</sup> Shamshilbayan had nine daughters and three sons; I also have nine daughters and three sons. This spirit protects me and gives me knowledge (*korip häm ukitip*). This spirit supports me. I don't dream; her spirit communicates with me directly.<sup>72</sup>

Although the concept of "*arwakh*" is widespread among Tatars, it is usually absent from the tradition of transmitting religious knowledge among

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Gulshira Sapariyeva, Akkulsk, May 17, 2018 and May 16, 2019.

<sup>69</sup> Sura 112 of the Qur'an.

<sup>70</sup> Interview with Gulshira Sapariyeva, Akkulsk, May 17, 2018 and May 16, 2019.

<sup>71</sup> She also uses another similar expression: "her spirit descended on me (*aniñ iyase miña kongan*)".

<sup>72</sup> Interview with Gulshira Sapariyeva, Akkulsk, May 17, 2018 and May 16, 2019.

women. Usually, wives of mullahs were referred to as abistays, and often abistays came from families of Muslim scholars. Traditionally in Tatar society, the abistays were engaged in teaching girls and transmitting religious knowledge to women.<sup>73</sup> Although Gulshira does not call herself an abistay and admits that she never had religious education, she indirectly implies such authority through the words of other religiously authoritative people: “As Husayn-babay said, I became an abistay”. “I go to the graves and read the Qur’an there.”<sup>74</sup> Gulshira demonstrates deep understanding of the concept of *arwakh* and the importance of this concept in the transmission of spiritual authority. She bases her spiritual authority on her connection to the soul of her great-grandmother.

Second, she upholds her authority by creating sacred narratives and stories about a person who built the mosque. Since there is no saint associated with the Akkulsk mosque, she crafted her own story about a person who erected the mosque as a saintly figure. While Zakira’s notes provide evidence that it was Mutallap Fazylbekov who built the mosque, Gulshira’s version takes Mutallap’s father Sultangali Fazylbekov, who performed hajj, as the main protagonist and almost a saint:

Sultangali khaji came back from the hajj and built the mosque. He went to hajj when he was 15 years old and came back when he was around 40. For seven years he dried the wood and only after seven years did he begin to build the mosque. It is built from the local pine wood (*karagay*). He built the mosque with his money and then died a few years later, at the age of 63. He never married. He built it all by himself and became its first imam. The minaret and the mosque were built so ideally that when some specialists came and measured the direction of the mosque, they couldn’t find even a millimeter of error; it directly faced the Kaaba.<sup>75</sup>

Gulshira’s narrative is one of sacralization, with Sultangali as the central figure in the construction of the mosque. She portrays Sultangali as a “saint” due to the fact that he spent most of his life in the Holy Lands, never married, prepared the wood for the mosque for seven years, built the mosque single-handedly, became its first imam, and died at the age of 63, just like Prophet Muhammad. Gulshira connects herself to the powerful legacy of Sultangali and his house in order to enhance her authority:

The house that I am living now is the house of Sultangali. That’s why I cannot leave it. I cannot move from here.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>73</sup> GARIPOVA 2016.

<sup>74</sup> Interview with Gulshira Sapariyeva, Akkulsk, May 17, 2018 and May 16, 2019. In Central Asian communities, women who knew how to read Arabic script and who knew some Qur’anic suras by heart could be referred to as abistays. Galiya Karmysheva for example tells that people referred to her mother as an abistay. KARMYSHEVA 2004.

<sup>75</sup> Interview with Gulshira Sapariyeva, Akkulsk, May 17, 2018, and May 16, 2019.

<sup>76</sup> Interview with Gulshira Sapariyeva, Akkulsk, May 17, 2018, and May 16, 2019.

However, as we know from the above-mentioned account and the archival material, Sultangali did not in fact finance the construction of the mosque, and nor was he an imam. By claiming to live in his house, Gulshira appears to be suggesting that she continues the Fazyzbekovs' lineage of caretakers for the mosque that Sultangali built.

When I asked about the history of the house, Gulshira claimed that "in 1909 Sultangali's house was built on this site, but later our ancestor Marwat moved it to Aktas where it was burnt down. The current house was built in 1959, on the same spot where Sultangali's house stood. We were the first to build a house on this wasteland." Gulshira's attempt to sacralize Sultangali and the landscape by linking her powers and spirit to his legacy and his house is a further assertion of her authority:

My daughters often complain at my reluctance to move in with them. They say, "we can offer you better conditions to live with us". But I don't want to. I cannot. This place does not let me go. I have a very strong "em" [spirit] and this spirit does not allow me to leave. It's in my body. It always accompanies me. And this spirit is connected to Sultangali.<sup>77</sup>

When I asked her about other stories which people circulate about the mosque, Gulshira was rather skeptical about them or presented her own versions. For example, she said that she had heard nothing about a man who wanted to take wood from the mosque. Instead, she said that from her childhood she remembers seeing a man, a fellow villager, who said that there was nothing scary about the minaret and proceeded to climb it, whereupon a heavy gust of wind knocked him all the way to the ground, and he never again went near the place. When I asked her about the spirit of a woman who allegedly haunts the mosque, Gulshira rejected this story immediately:

No, no, there is nothing like this. Many people come to the mosque, they touch it, and they pat it. When I visit, I usually recite *ayat al-kursi*.<sup>78</sup> Neither wind nor rain can ruin it. But it makes a howling sound. Because there are no buildings around, it produces a plaintive sound when there is a strong wind. If you hear such a sound then it's time to close the gate, because there may be a strong wind. The winds are so strong here that they used to knock gates and electric poles down. But the mosque endures.<sup>79</sup>

As it is possible to see, there is a strong personification and humanization of this sacred object on the part of Gulshira.

Gulshira's intervention is clearly two-pronged: while her narrative presents the mosque as a holy place, it equally accords this sacral site a human touch. The mosque stands just across from Gulshira's house and

<sup>77</sup> Interview with Gulshira Sapariyeva, Akkul'sk, May 17, 2018, and May 16, 2019.

<sup>78</sup> *Ayat al-kursi* is verse 255 of Surat al-Baqara from the Qur'an.

<sup>79</sup> Interview with Gulshira Sapariyeva, Akkul'sk, May 17, 2018, and May 16, 2019.

Gulshira personifies it as a living friend. “We are always together; I look at it; and it looks at me”, said Gulshira, explaining her “friendship” with the mosque. Rufiya Khaibullina, another member of Fazylbekov family, confirmed that Gulshira speaks to the mosque and the mosque speaks back to her by making sounds; for example, it informs her when a strong wind will blow. Gulshira keeps praying for the longevity of the mosque, as if praying for a dying family member. She is afraid that the building may collapse any time soon, but she is also hopeful that it will withstand the winds and the frosts. Her concerns are shared by the Fazylbekovs, who similarly worry that the building may not survive. For them, the mosque is deeply significant because it bears testimony to the history of their family and of a once vibrant Muslim community in Akkul'sk. They keep close contact with Gulshira, for she “keeps an eye” on the mosque. Moreover, she is the person who safeguards the integrity of this sacred space for future collective memory. Together with the Fazylbekovs and other members of the Tatar community of Semey, Gulshira strongly objected to the proposal of local ethnographers and regional authorities to move the mosque to an open-air ethnographic museum in the city of Uskemen.

### **The Mosque as a Collective Memory Space of a Once Thriving Tatar Village or a Museum Artefact?**

Paolo Sartori observes of Sufi shrines that these latter “represented for Central Asia a collective ‘memory space’, i. e., a place in which the past was mobilized in the present by means of narration.”<sup>80</sup> He underlines that “Muslims were able to access the past through the surviving architectural presence of Islam.”<sup>81</sup> The Akkul'sk mosque preserves its significance as a collective ‘memory space’ of a once thriving Tatar village. Therefore, the descendants of Akkul'sk’s former residents, who now live in Semey, nearby villages and Astana, regard this mosque as an important marker of their past and the past of their community. Indeed, when people come here, they are able to access the past through the architectural presence of the mosque and through Gulshira’s stories and her Qur’anic recitations. Gulshira plays an important role by keeping this collective ‘memory space’ alive and constantly recreating it.

The significance of the memory and the role of the mosque as a central unifying force were particularly evident in the debate surrounding its relocation to the ethnographic museum in the city of Uskemen. The head of the ethnographic museum, Nikolay Alekseevich Zaitsev, proposed disassem-

<sup>80</sup> SARTORI 2019, 387.

<sup>81</sup> SARTORI 2019, 387.

bling the Akkul'sk mosque and moving it to Uskemen's ethnographic center for reconstruction (*vossozdat' i otrestavrirovat'*) in order to showcase this monument to the public.<sup>82</sup> The reasoning behind the proposal was that the mosque was already deteriorating and would soon be beyond repair. By relocating it to Uskemen, there would be an opportunity to restore and preserve it, thus safeguarding the cultural heritage of one of the ethnic communities of North-East Kazakhstan.<sup>83</sup> Local ethnographers have expressed concern about the mosque's deteriorating condition and have called for its urgent restoration. They have observed the minaret tilting further and have warned that it could collapse at any moment. Marat Erkimbekovich, the head of the local historians' society, believes that the mosque cannot function as a mosque anymore and is already a historical monument that needs to be preserved. He argued that moving the mosque to Uskemen would be a better option than allowing it to perish.<sup>84</sup> Another well-known ethnographer from Semey, Mikhail Ibragimovich Situda, also agrees that the Akkul'sk mosque needs to be rescued quickly and that the best course of action would be to move the mosque to Uskemen and recreate the historical model. Despite the objections of the residents of Akkul'sk, who planned to raise funds and hire specialists to restore the mosque on their own, Situda highlights that the village has just a few residents who cannot preserve the mosque. Leaving it in place would be futile, he suggests, as there is no one to take care of it.<sup>85</sup>

While for local historians this mosque is a valuable historical monument that needs to be preserved as the heritage of the Tatar community, for the Tatar community it is more significant as a sacred space. There is a large and perhaps not very visible community of Tatars who live in villages, in Semey and other cities, whose members are descendants of those people who once lived in Akkul'sk. For these people, the mosque, the cemetery, and the entire cultural landscape represent a sacred space that they regularly visit. When I asked a resident of Semey, the head of the Tatar music school Gabelhak Gabdullovich Akhunzhanov, about the transfer of the mosque, he explained that "The mosque is connected to its land and the land is my native village (*rodnaia derevnia*). My father grew up in this village. I used to come here when I was a young boy".<sup>86</sup> Another person,

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<sup>82</sup> Interview with Situda Mikhail Ibragimovich.

<sup>83</sup> For example, Uskemen's historical-ethnographic museum boasts a wonderful collection of traditionally decorated and furnished houses of Kazakhstan's different ethnic communities including Ukrainians, Russians, Koreans, Germans, Tatars and others.

<sup>84</sup> Interview with Marat Erkimbekovich Sasanov.

<sup>85</sup> Interview with Mikhail Ibragimovich Situda.

<sup>86</sup> Interview with Gabelhak Gabdullovich Akhunzhanov.

who once resided in this village, Rufiya, now a resident of Zhylandy, underlined,

For me the mosque is everything. I come to visit it quite often. I cannot resist touching its wooden planks. It is my childhood. I pray for it so that it may survive. It is such a relief for my soul to see the mosque and pray there. If we count the descendants [of people who lived here], there are so many of them – Tatars, Kazakhs – who live in other villages, in Semey and even Astana. I am sure that many people come and ask for something, especially those who are the descendants.<sup>87</sup>

And many of the descendants visit the house of Gulshira as the keeper of the mosque. Rufiya tells that she always drops by Gulshira's place and "she prays for all my deceased relatives; she knows all of them by name." Gulshira sees herself as a connecting point for all these descendants. She is not only the keeper of the mosque but also a person who connects the living relatives with the deceased by praying for the *arwakhs* of those who have died.

### Conclusion

The Akkulsk mosque, along with its surrounding graveyard and the house of its female keeper, constitutes a sacred space. Originally built in a small village of Tatar Muslims in the North-East Kazakh steppe, the mosque transformed into a shrine after the village was almost abandoned. Despite its state of disrepair, people continued to visit the mosque, touching its walls, and sharing stories about it. Even though many old mosques were rebuilt and reopened after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Akkulsk mosque remained in a state of disrepair for decades, seemingly testing the resilience of Islam as a material culture. What remained was not merely a dilapidated building, but rather a collection of mystical narratives that gave the mosque its reason for existence.

While there were no saints associated with this "shrine," the mystical narratives surrounding the mosque and the stories told by its custodian about her relationship with the building and its supposed founder helped to create this sacred space. This phenomenon can be seen as an example of hierotopy, in which the female mosque keeper has played a crucial role in disseminating mystical narratives about the mosque and in its transformation into a sacred place. The tradition of the keeper of mausoleums and shrines (*shyrakshy*) is widespread in the Islamic tradition of the Kazakh steppe. This role is typically associated with Sufi shrines and mazars, and is predominantly performed by men. However, in the case of the Akkulsk mosque, the custodian is a woman named Gulshira. As with other shrine

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<sup>87</sup> Interview with Rufiya Khaibullina.

complexes, Gulshira receives and guides visitors to the mosque and cemetery and recites prayers and verses from the Qur'an.

The sacralization of the mosque building enhanced its value for those with a real or assumed connection to it, and the preservation and reconstruction of the mosque became a significant point of contention. Descendants of the former inhabitants of the Akkul'sk village, along with historians and local and regional state authorities, participated in the debate. Although the state and scholarly authorities were initially skeptical about rebuilding the mosque in its original location, in 2022, the descendants of the former inhabitants of the village successfully collected the necessary funds to rebuild the mosque, preserving its minaret and small cupola. Today, the mosque stands tall and proud in its original location, drawing not only those who revere it as a sacred place but also those seeking a place to perform their prayers along the M-38 highway.

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III. 1: The keeper of the mosque Gulshira Saidakhmetqizi Sapariyeva with the author



Ill. 2: The benefactor of the Akkulsk mosque, merchant Mukhammad Wali Khamitov with his family, c. 1900s (photo from the museum of the Tatar Cultural Center at Semey)



III. 3: The exterior of the Akkulsk mosque in 2018



III. 4: The interior of the Akkulsk mosque in 2018



Ill. 5: The imperial sign on one of the original logs of the mosque (open access photo, provided by Madiyar Nasyrov)



III. 6: The graves of members of the Fazylbekov family at the Akkulsk cemetery



III. 7: The new building of the Akkulsk mosque with the original minaret and the cupola, 2022 (open access photo, provided by Madiyar Nasyrov)



III. 8: The interior of the Akkulsk mosque after reconstruction, 2022 (open access photo, provided by Madiyar Nasyrov)