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## Muslim Family Ceremonies in the Life of Contemporary Tatars: Traditions and Innovations

**Abstract.** The last decades of sociopolitical transformation in Russia affected the intensification of ethnic and religious processes in the society. The revival of Islam among the Tatars caused a sharp increase of the number of religious communities and mosques, a strengthening of their religious consciousness, and an intensification of religious practices. Muslim family rituals such as *Nikkah* (the religious wedding rite), *Isem qushu* (the rite of childrens' naming), *Sunnat* (the rite of circumcision), and different funerary and memorial rites are widely practiced among the Tatars and perceived as a significant part of the Tatars' festive culture.

Religious traditions in the family ceremonial culture of contemporary Tatars are being reanimated in new forms, as the traditions—innovations, that are formed under the influence of the process of reislamization of the Tatar society and the process of its modernization.

**Keywords:** innovation, Islam, Muslim rites, religion, religious revival, tradition.

The turn of the 20th and the 21st centuries marked the beginning of the religious revival in the regions of Russia, especially the revival of Islam. According to some estimates, the number of Muslims in Russia is about 18—20 million. Of that number, the Tatars are the most numerous Muslim ethnic community. Three-quarters of the Tatars live in the Volga river region, including the Republic of Tatarstan. It is necessary to stress that the Tatars are considerably urbanized: 70% of them reside in cities.

There are both external and internal indicators of the process of Islamic renaissance. External indicators include: a sharp increase in the number of religious communities and mosques (in 1960s there were only 12 mosques functioning in the republic; now there are about 1,500); wider usage of Muslim attributes and symbols in the household, including decorative items and style of clothing.

Internal indicators of the Islamic renaissance relate to mass consciousness.

In today's conditions of rapid sociopolitical transformation, of the intensification of ethnic and religious factors in society, it is important to understand the perceptions of religion at the mass level in different spheres of life.

The data of ethnosociological researches (mass surveys), which we have conducted in the Republic of Tatarstan for more than 20 years, show the strengthening trend of the religious component of the Tatars' mass consciousness and express positive dynamics of inter-related processes—the growth of the ethnic identity, the religious identity, the religious solidarity and the religious consciousness of the Tatars (Table 1). Even taking into account the relativity of the digital materials in such a delicate and deeply personal sphere like religion, the tendency of changes of the Tatars' religious consciousness was rather eloquently expressed.

Table 1

*The dynamics of growth of the Tatars' religious consciousness, confessional identity, confessional solidarity and actualized ethnic identity<sup>1</sup>, urban population of Tatarstan, %*

Years of the researches	Religious consciousness	Confessional identity	Confessional solidarity	Actualized ethnic identity
1990	34,0	—	—	—
1994	66,0	70,1	—	50,5
1997	81,0	92,4	—	—
1999	—	—	66,9	51,9
2002	83,3	93,5	93,9	61,2
2011	84,4	93,1	95,3	77,6
2013	84,3	84,3	89,5	78,3

By the beginning of the 2000s more than 84% of the respondents in the cities and 91% in rural areas of the republic self-identified as believers, and half of them perceived themselves as “believers who try to observe religious customs and rituals.” But the proportion of those who strictly fulfill all the requirements of Islam is rather small—no

more than 6—8% of the respondents. The religious behavior of the Tatars is characterized mostly by episodic religious practices, such as praying, visiting mosques, food fasting and some other practices (30—50%). Much more often religious practices among the Tatars are associated with the preservation of a festive religious culture and the rituals of the life cycle—from 70% to 90% of respondents try to fulfill them.

It should be noted that in the Soviet period, under the domination of atheistic ideology and total state control of religion in public life, Muslim identity was manifested mainly in the private sphere, in the fulfillment of the rites of the family cycle. The term *ritualism* (*obryadoverie*) reveals best the essence of the role of Islam in the Tatars' life during the Soviet years. Numerous ethnographic observations show that in the Soviet period the Tatars identified Muslim religious rituals of family cycle with the Tatar's national and folk rites.

Such family rituals as *Nickah* (the religious wedding rite), *Isem qushu* (the rite of childrens' naming), *Sunnat* (the rite of circumcision), and different funerary and memorial rites were widely practiced among the Tartars, especially if there were grandparents in the family. These family religious ceremonies, the main core of which is praying (reciting the verses of the Qur'an), are perceived as a significant part of the Tatars' festive culture. The preservation of these ceremonies was helped by the fact that they were traditionally held at home, and they could be held by any man who knows the relevant verses of the Qur'an. Those men often may not be, or have been, official mullahs but elderly neighbors or relatives.

According to the research conducted by the author in 1980 in Pestrechinsky and Menzelinsky districts, two rural districts of the republic, the *Nickah* was recorded in more than four-fifths of the families (85%). More than half (56%) of the families, in which there were the boys, carried out the rite of *Sunnat*. These ceremonies were often conducted in secret. Almost every fourth of the *Nickah* (18%) was performed by the parents of the newlyweds even without the participation of the bride and groom.

Table 2 summarizes the researcher's data of the last quarter of the 20th century, which shows a slight increase in the number of families

conducting religious rituals of the family cycle. The overall situation of recent years is close to that of the past, reflecting the deep roots of the Muslim family rites.

Table 2

*Conducting Muslim family rites, %*

Years	Nickah		Isem qushu		Sunnat	
	urban	rural	urban	rural	urban	rural
1989/1990	71,5	81,3	60,3	77,5	45,7	66,8
2013	76,5	87,9	66,8	86,9	43,8	70,6

Muslim family rituals are perceived by people as organic parts of their ethno-national culture, as an expression of ethnic traditions, and as a factor of ethnic identification. Not coincidentally, these ceremonies were performed not only by believers but also by those who called themselves unbelievers or atheists.

Religious family ceremonies now have undergone significant changes compared with traditional ceremonies. The changes relate to the form and the place of the rites, to the composition of the guests and the clothing, to the list of festive dishes, and so forth. Tatars' contemporary family rituals surprisingly combine religious and secular elements, both of the Soviet era and contemporary times. It is widely practiced to hold double rites—religious and secular—separately. The sequence of them may be different. The clothing of the participants, types of festive dishes and some other of the rite's components are also different. For instance, the religious marriage ritual Nickah is held a few days earlier than the wedding party. Notwithstanding the restrictions proscribed by Islam of the separation of men and women in these rituals, now they are invited to participate together. The hallmark of this ceremony is the absence of alcoholic drinks on the table and the obligatory presence of headgear: headscarf for women and skullcap (*tubeteyka*) for men. The mullah asks the newlyweds if they consented to the marriage; then he reads verses of the Qur'an and preaches for the bride and groom and their guests (Fig. 1, 2). After that the mullah hands newlyweds a nikah certificate (Fig. 3).

Though traditionally religious rituals were held at home, now more often (especially in the cities) the ceremonies of *Nickah*, *Isem qushu*



*Fig. 1. Nickah in the Kul Sharif Mosque, Kazan, 2002.  
Photo in possession of the Kul Sharif Mosque*



*Fig. 2. Nickah tue (Nikah party) at home, 2015. Photo: E. Sagdieva*

are carried out in mosques. This is quite a new phenomenon in the Tatars' festive culture. It is the author's hypothesis that this new trend is due to the growing role of Islam in the Tatars' life and to the



Fig. 3. The mullah hands a Nikah certificate, 2015. Photo: I. Mullin

impact of the neighboring Orthodox Russians, who hold their similar ceremonies—weddings and baptisms—in their churches.

Innovations appeared even in the most conservative rites—in funerary and memorial rites, with mandated mullahs reading the prayers and relevant verses of the Qur'an. The repasts of the third and the seventh days are held at home quite moderately. Only a few, generally elderly, men and women are invited to a funeral meal, alternating by gender: if men are invited to attend the repast of the third day, then women are invited for the repast of the seventh day and vice versa. The 40th day and one-year funeral repasts are held with a significant number of guests; as of the last few years, these repasts are, sometimes, carried out not only at home, but also in cafes and restaurants.

Looking closer at the ritual of naming, we find that the birth and the upbringing of children are the most important duties of the family. The Tatars usually say: "*Balaly i-bazar, balasyz i-mazar*" ("A house with children resembles a market; a house without children—a cemetery"). *Isem qushu* is one of the first rituals among those of the life cycle.





Fig. 4—5. Isem qushu (naming),  
2000. Photo: G. Ismagilov

The Tatars aim to perform this ritual within a few days of a child's birth: it is considered dangerous to leave the child without a name longer, as a child could be ill. Ordinarily, only men participate in this ceremony: the mullah and a few elderly men—relatives and neighbors. The ceremony consists of the following acts: a child is laid in front of a mullah on the pillow, the child's head pointing in the direction of the *qibla* (direction of the Kaaba, which Muslims turn to, while praying) (Figs. 4—5). The mullah prays, then speaks the name to the ears of the child three times (first to the right, then to the left, "*Let your name be so-and-so*") and then records it in the birth registration book. The naming ceremony is concluded with a feast for the male ceremony participants and later for the women among the relatives.

A great variety of names is quite typical for Tatars. There are names of Turkic origin, names of Arabian or Persian origin, a great number of western names (Alfred, Rafael, Robert, Kamilla), and also names connected to place names, stars and names of flowers (Mars, Nil, Venera, Rosa, Liliya). Tatar families traditionally try to give their children names in harmony with those of their brothers, sisters, or parents. Nowadays, all the names in a family often start with one common letter (Raif, Rais, Rawil, Raziya) or the same ending consonant (Khidiyat, Talgat, Rifkat). The tradition of giving names to sons and daughters with a common root is widespread (Farid / Farida, Danis / Daniya). During the last 20 years on the wave of ethnic and religious renaissance Turkic names (such as Ilnur 'ray of homeland', Aigul 'moon's flower') and Muslim names (Mohammed, Gaysha, Madina, etc) have become more popular in Tatar families.

During the Soviet period, for the Tatars' families, as well as for others, it has become a tradition to celebrate birthdays. After the legalization of religion in the post-Soviet decades, a new tradition has been added to the ritual life of the Tatars: elderly people began to celebrate their birthdays in the form of the *House Medjlises* with the invitation of a mullah or an *abystai*, with reading verses of the Qur'an, *munajats* and *baits* (forms of Muslim chants of folk art) (Fig. 6).

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In conclusion, the rites connected with the strengthening of Muslim identity, and the readoption of Islamic practices and its religious





*Fig. 6. Qur'an ashy (Medjlis), 2008. Photo: M. Medvedev*

traditions, are being integrated into the festive and ceremonial culture of contemporary Tatars. The festive culture of the Tatars during the post-Soviet period is characterized by the combination of elements including both religious practices and secular norms.

Religious traditions in the family ceremonial culture of contemporary Tatars are being reanimated in new forms, as the traditions-innovations, that are formed under the influence of the process of reislamization of the Tatar society and the process of its modernization.

### Notes

1. The level of religious consciousness was determined by the answer to the following questions: "Do you believe in God? Are you a believer?" The level of confessional identity was determined by the proportion of individuals who (when asked "Which confession do you belong to?") self identified as Muslim. The level of confessional solidarity was determined by the proportion of individuals who chose the answers "I feel pretty much" and "I feel to some extent" with regards to a certain sense of unity with people of their faith.