
NOTES AND REVIEWS

INTRODUCTION:
SACRED GEOGRAPHIES AND IDENTITY CLAIMS:
THE REVIVAL OF SACRED SITES IN THE POST-SOVIET SPACE

One significant form of the religious revival in the post-Soviet space is the revival of sacred sites, a revival that takes many forms. The (re)emergence of a sacred geography can be linked to identity claims, as laying claims to a sacred space often corresponds to the process of laying claims to a particular identity (Vovina 2006).

Sacred places in the Soviet period did not simply disappear. Religious buildings such as mosques and churches were desecrated by conversion into storage spaces, libraries or factories. In the case of rural sacred sites (saints' graves, trees, natural springs), pilgrimages continued, although in a more restricted form. Since the end of the Soviet Union we have witnessed a revival of these sacred sites, but what does this revival mean and how can it be approached? Against the background of attempts at desecration or at 'muting' the sacred during the Soviet period, should the revival of sacred sites be understood as a process of de-secularisation and re-enchantment? How is this process connected to identity claims?

This forum explores these questions by examining the process of reviving sacred sites in various post-Soviet countries, specifically Russia (the Urals, Dagestan and North Ossetia), Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. The contributions to the forum show diverse ways in which processes of reviving or preserving these sites are connected with forms of identification (religious, secular, ethnic, national and transnational), as revealed through the prism of practice, narrative and materiality. The multiple identities that have emerged

during the revival of sacred space can blend, coexist or compete.

The Perception and Formation of Place and Space

(Re)sacralisation can be understood as a process through which certain places, objects or people are singled out and set apart. In its secular dimension, sacralisation can occur in relation to the process of heritage formation as a "kind of sacralization, through which cultural forms are lifted up and set apart so as to be able to speak of what is considered to be central to social life" (Meyer and de Witte 2013: 276). The revival of sacred places takes multiple forms: material renovation, renewed activity at the sites (profane or religious), and the renewed appropriation of these sites by pilgrims and visitors. We can distinguish two interlinked ways to approach sacred sites. One way is to look at the effect of human agency on a sacred place and on the sacred. Another way is to look at the way sacred places transform or maintain subjectivities.

If we look at the effect of human agency on sacred places, we can observe that the renovation of sites and the renewed activity that characterises them cannot be understood simply in terms of de-secularisation and re-enchantment. Indeed, the state can play a major role in restoring a sacred geography. In this case, the sacred can acquire both a secular and a religious dimension. How can we then approach the interplay of these two dimensions of the sacred? Does secularisation necessarily mean an attempt to diminish the religiously sacred?

In Henri Lefebvre's (1974) spatial triad, space can be studied at different levels. Space can be used in spatial practice and daily routines in the sense of 'perceived space'; it can be lived and experienced at the level of everyday life; and it can be 'conceived' when mapped by urbanists and planners producing representations of space. The two dimensions of conceptual and lived space suggest two different, but potentially interlinked, approaches to sacred sites in the post-Soviet space.

Several contributions to the forum show that the state has become an important actor in the revival and maintenance of sacred sites. The process of *museumification* and of the state-sponsored renovation of sacred space has gained prominence in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan as a means to consolidate national forms of belonging by constituting Islam as an object of heritage (Benjamin Gatling, Ulan Bigozhin, Aimar Ventsel). Heritage making and museumification can be understood as efforts to shape an experience of the sacred in the framework of national identity (Aslan 2014). One important effect of the process of museumification is the transformation of saintly figures buried at these sites. They become 'nationalised'; a transformation from local tribal saints (Bigozhin) and saints of transnational Muslim importance (Gatling) to national heritage figures. The state's claims to sacred sites can also have the effect of dissuading the open practice of religious rituals, for example reciting the Quran (Gatling). However, the process of constructing state-endorsed forms of national belonging can have diverse outcomes. It can support the development of civil religion (Bigozhin), but it can also have no clear effect in terms of creating state-endorsed Muslim subjectivities, as noted by Gatling in his study of Tajikistan. In the case of Tajikistan, different practices and stories can co-exist at one sacred site, even if the religious rituals are less visible. The nationalisation of the sacred geography takes different forms in Russia: we find either an absence of the state (Iwona Kaliszewska

or the process of making certain places more Orthodox Christian (Sergei Shtyrkov) and the presence of official religious bodies as regulators of pilgrimage practices (Lili Di Puppò and Jesko Schmoller).

The lived experiences of pilgrims and visitors provide another angle from which to study the renewal of sacred sites. In this case, sacred space is reawakened or produced through pilgrimage practices, and the space might take the form of an ancestral homeland (Dubuisson and Genina 2012). Pilgrimage practices lead to different ways in which sacred places become connected to identity claims. Visitors can shape certain places and landscapes, also beyond the representations produced by the national state (*ibid.*) in accordance with their religious, ethnic or national self-perception. They can inhabit as pilgrims notions of space and time that transcend the frames of conventional national history or national territorial boundaries. Pilgrimage can blend different identifications, as shown by Bigozhin in the case of Kazakh pilgrims who combine religion with nationalism on their journey back to an imaginary sacred homeland. Pilgrimage often takes the form of a journey back into nature, temporarily escaping from city life, which reinforces a sense of belonging: religious/ethnic as in the case of Bashkir pilgrims (Di Puppò and Schmoller) and also national (Bigozhin). In the case of the Kazakh pilgrims studied by Bigozhin, their pilgrimage practices correspond to some extent to the state project of creating national identities. In the case of the Sufi pilgrims in Tajikistan (Gatling), however, their practices exist independently of other pilgrimage conduct that the state seeks to enforce.

Some of the contributions also shed light on processes of contestation, the existence of competing claims to the sacred. In relation to ethnicity, local religious practices are understood either as the ethnicisation of a world religion or as the primordial native faith, which might be threatened or destroyed by world religions (Shtyrkov). In North Ossetia,

local shrines are seen as symbols of Ossetian identity and culture. As in the Urals, local pilgrimage serves to reinforce a local ethnicity, while certain interpretations present in world religions such as Christianity and Islam, emphasising a global vision, can be seen as potential threats to these ethnic particularities. Identity claims translate into the materiality of sites. In North Ossetia, someone throws orthodox icons out of a *dzuar* (shrine), in this case a chapel in the village of Kharisdzhin (Shtyrkov), a move that can be attributed to Ossetian nativists. In the Urals, the presence of colourful ribbons tied to trees, as a contested ritual practice, at the sacred site of Aushtau establishes a connection with nearby Kazakhstan and wider Central Asia. By prohibiting this practice on boards near the site, local Muslim spiritual authorities want to connect more to the broader Muslim world in their enforcement of a specific pilgrimage etiquette. In these latter cases, certain pilgrimage behaviours are enforced from above, but not necessarily followed by the pilgrims who experience the sites by connecting them to alternative identity claims, creating alternative connections between places.

The roles of pilgrims and visitors, the material culture at the site, the environment and sacred objects, which can all be experienced as alive, question the image of sacred places as empty canvases onto which varying meanings can be projected. The sacred site, in the form of its material culture, built structures, sacred objects, trees, natural springs and in the form of the presence of buried saints, radiates blessings. Hence, the significance of the sites' sacredness cannot simply be altered at will, from religious to secular, from tribal to national, etc. Sacred sites can be seen as transformative of the visitors and their identities in ways that cannot be controlled.

Reassessing the Notion of Revival

The question of the (im)possibility of altering the meaning and experience of a sacred space leads to an examination of the notion

of revival. Does revival mean reviving 'old' ways of inhabiting the sacred sites, or creating new ways of experiencing and conceiving them? Do we find contestation of the existence of 'original' ways of experiencing the sacred? Are sites simply *rediscovered* as places maintaining their sacredness independently of human agency or are they reawakened through the various ways in which humans appropriate them and interact with non-humans? Can the sacredness of sites be experienced as 'lost' as a result of attempts to alter it or can different experiences of the sacred simply coexist in one place?

These questions, related to the revival of sacred sites, further elicit the question of material renovation and maintenance. The very process of restoring and renovating sacred sites can be connected to particular identity claims. An imposing and well-maintained architecture can be perceived by some as decreasing the religious sacredness of a site by turning it into a touristic space, as Ventsel notes with reference to Ahmet Yasawi's shrine in Turkestan. Hence, some consider the nearby mausoleum of Arystan Bab, with its non-renovated buildings and wells of holy salty water, a more authentic pilgrimage site. According to this view, a site retains a more authentic religious character if left in its simplicity. State-sponsored *conservation* can appear to be an attempt to fix the sacred in an immobile state through the process of museumification and thus leave behind the lived experience by secularising the sacred, in the sense of rendering this experience more uniform. As seen in the case of Sufi pilgrims in Tajikistan (Gatling), the attempt to regulate experiences of a site from above turns out to be not entirely successful. In Dagestan, an imposing mosque constructed at a site and well-maintained roads serve to elevate the status of the local Shiri community, as the donors are community members (Kaliszewska). In the case of North Ossetia, the renovation of disused sites serves to integrate them into Russian Orthodoxy, a process that generates local discontent (Shtyrkov).

The work of renovating the *dzuartæ* – many of which are ancient churches and chapels, sometimes in ruins – corresponds to a process of defining these sites as Christian sacred places by restoring their ‘authentic’ character. However, these claims are countered by Ossetian nativists, who defend another view of a primordial native faith as the authentic religion of Ossetians. In Bashkortostan, the transnational Naqshbandi Haqqani Sufi brotherhood restores and even creates new pilgrimage centres that are directly connected with Bashkir ethnicity (Di Puppò and Schmoller).

The various ways in which sacred sites become (re)embedded in a vaster geography constitute another dimension of their revival. Sacred sites can be understood as part of a bigger whole, as, for example, with pilgrimage routes that consider a number of places. Territorial connections change through the materiality, practices and narratives associated with sacred space. With its prominent mausoleum (Ventsel), the shrine of Ahmet Yasawi in Turkestan becomes associated with the Kazakh nation-state (Bigozhin). At the same time, the languages used on signs and boards, where Russian is notably absent, and a history room established in cooperation with Turkey, connect the site to the broader Turkic Muslim world (Ventsel). Apart from these state interventions, the associations and imagination of pilgrims and visitors from near and far contribute to placing sacred sites in more expansive contexts. Thus, by moving along the old and occasionally new routes, they are being experienced and produced as parts of larger formations, which may be networks, cultural spheres or civilisations. Such novel placements and contextualisations have important consequences insofar as they can be understood as discontinuing the Soviet heritage and revitalising older or other patterns of movement and connection.

In conclusion, the contributions to the forum show that sacred sites are both places of encounter for different ethnicities and religions that transcend national boundaries, and places that serve to strengthen local, national and ethnic identities.

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