

## AHL AL-SUNNAH: CONCEPTUAL AND FORMAL NOTIONS OF THE ISLAMIC IDENTITY AT THE LATE 19TH -20TH CENTURIES IN THE VOLGA REGION

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The relevance of the problem under study is caused by the increased interest the society has in Islam, its history in the Russian Federation, and particularly in the rites and practices. The article considers forming of the conceptual content of the concept of “Ahl al-Sunnah” (People of the Sunnah) and its lay interpretation at the 19th – 20th centuries. The leading approach to studying this problem is an in-depth analysis of the periodicals and publications as a source that conveys the attitude of contemporaries in the most reliable manner. The article identifies the key features of Muslim identity in the Volga-Ural Region, its heterogeneity and the presence of sub-identities that have formal and conceptual features of common people’s self-awareness. The development of this type of sources shows that the Muslim identity implied a double interpretation in the intellectual space of ulama (scholars) and in everyday practice of adherents of Islam.

**Keywords:** history, identity, Sunnah, Islam, Volga Region, religious practices.

### INTRODUCTION

In its development, every society formulates certain behavioral standards, which are considered the norm in a particular society. Social norms are a generally accepted convention of general rules of conduct, compliance with which separates the norm from the deviation. The main criterion that severs “acceptable” from “unacceptable” is morals. The Muslim paradigm “Adab” (morals) is closely connected with “Akhlaq” (ethics), they are based on the Quran, the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad and fiqh (Muslim law) that regulate strictly the various aspects of Muslim life. At the same time, without doubt, the obligatory norms of morals and external acts of worship are called “fardh” (faridah) and “wajib”. However, the Sunnah (life) is the main archetype, every faithful believer was to seek, but it is not, obviously, obligatory to follow.

In particular, the theological tradition of the Volga Region also addressed this problem, for example, T. Yalchugul, Hibat Allah ibn Saidbattal, G. Utyz Imyani (Kemper, 2008), and others. The realities of the era, the rise of religious and ethnic awareness required that contemporaries clearly distinguish between “us” and “others”. It should be noted that in the context of development of the Tatar ethnicity, the confessionalism “Ahl Islam” (Muslims) (Iskhakov, 1998) was widely common among the Kazan Tatars in the 18th – 19th centuries. This feature of the Tatar people’s self-awareness was noticed by Ş. Marjani (Marjani, 1989).

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The social brainpower elites tried to raise a new generation of Muslims at the turn of the century in a clear understanding of Muslimism and Islam. Its interpretation as a set of formal and conceptual features distinguishing the “faithful believers” from the “unfaithful”.

## **METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Objectives of the study**

The study was to achieve the following objective: to identify the characteristic features of how the concept of “Ahl al-Sunnah” was construed in the Muslim community of the Volga Region in the late 19th century – early 20th century.

### **Theoretical methods**

The work is based on the principle of historicism and objectivity. To study of the topic in question, we analyzed a set of different types of sources, including: the historical-genetic method that allows identifying the dynamics of social and cultural trends that are dominant in the society, which makes it possible to record manifestations of conservatism of Muslim laymen and their response to “innovations” in the religious life. The system approach involving analysis of all the factors that influence the self-awareness and self-identity in everyday life; the comparative method necessary to compare the levels of interpretation by lay people and scholars; the historical and descriptive method, as the paper uses widely memories and documents describing various sides of Muslims’ everyday life.

### **Base of sources for the study**

The base of sources for the study includes periodicals, theological and secular journalism, as well as ethnographic materials. This corpus of sources contains original information from the life of Muslims in different regions of the Volga Region. While being judgmental, this type of sources is very important because it reflects the commentators’ attitude and emotional experience.

## **RESULTS**

- 1) Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama’ah, translated as “people of the Sunnah and community”, is the general confessionalism for Sunni followers of Islam. In the context of regional identity, it was associated with ulama and the conscious revival of the Sunnah. The intellectual environment of scholars, men of law, religious leaders offered the criteria of belonging to the elite “caste”, thus creating a conditional framework of a sub-identity in the space of the same religious field. One of the first researchers who paid attention to the heterogeneity of the religious self-awareness was educator and theologian Sh. Sharaf (1877-1938). In 1916, Shagar Sharaf asked “Are there Ahl al-Sunnah

among us” in the magazine “Din wa’-Adab”. In the article, the honorable teacher of madrasah tries to explain conceptual and some formal criteria of “people of the Sunnah” and distance to some extent them from “Ahl Islam”.

According to the author: “... to the extent that he [a Muslim] acts little according to the Sunnah and sips little from the Sunnah, so accordingly its relation decreases to the Messenger of Allah and to his way, and the relation to Ahl al-Sunnah remains just nominal. So, every Muslim who is sincere to the Messenger of Allah must know various pieces of the Sunnah in every possible way and act in compliance with these pieces of the Sunnah” (Sharaf, 1916).

In his article, Shagar Sharaf is prone to divide his contemporaries by degree in which their life is complied with the lifestyle of the Sunnah: into “scholars” and “people”. For the former, hadiths and the Sunnah must be their life creed. Not a general guide for behavior in society, but a specific instruction for action, otherwise belonging to the “Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama’ah” can be put into question (Sharaf, 1916).

And the people, according to the author, “is sincere to the religion, but their efforts are not great enough to able to revive the Sunnah” (Sharaf, 1916). Sh. Sharaf believes that the main guilt of his contemporaries is the fact that they are mostly guided by “those pieces of the Sunnah that were relied on earlier ... that were left by their parents and grandparents” (Sharaf, 1916). That is, they neither improve nor increase their knowledge of the Sunnah and hadiths, thus they do not come closer to the ideal of Ahl al-Sunnah, but instead, they create their own local model of “Ahl Islam” limited to particular pieces of the Sunnah.

The set of rites related to the birth of a child is directly related to the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad and, therefore, fulfillment of them brought man closer to the archetype of the Ahl al-Sunnah.

According to contemporaries, the rite of name giving (in Tatar: isem kushu, at salu, atatu (Urazmanova, 2013) was carried out three days, a week or two weeks later. It consisted in the following: the preliminarily invited imam entered the home of a newborn and pronounced loudly the Adhan (call to prayer) on right ear of the baby, and then he pronounced iqamah (second call to prayer) on his left ear (Koblov, 1908).

The next rite was the first haircut. As a desirable action (muhtasab), shaving the head was carried out everywhere: “People with middle income pay in silver in proportion to the weight of the hair (the same weight), and the rich in gold” (Koblov, 1908). In addition, on the same day, the wealthy people could sacrifice a ram in gratitude for a daughter and two rams in gratitude for a son (gakyyka, nazyr-korban). This habit is a direct reference to the Sunnah: “It is believed that if someone does not offer up sacrifice, no mercy will be shown to them in the day of resurrection. If no sacrifice was offered for a child, then he must perform the rite when he achieves the age. According to the legend, Muhammad knew that no sacrifice had been

offered for him in his boyhood days and that is why he made a sacrifice for himself” (Koblov, 1908).

The last piece of the Sunnah associated with the birth of a child is the rite of circumcision. The meaning and importance of this rite for every Muslim was characterized by Ya.D. Koblov: “Upon the rite of circumcision, a child becomes a full-fledged member of a Mohammedan community. While circumcision has no dogmatic meaning – it is just a sunnat, that is, a commandment that is kept at the discretion of everyone, but this rite is so common among the Mohammedans that in the eyes of Mohammedan community, an uncircumcised man is not a true Mohammedan, even though he professed the dogmata of Islam” (Koblov, 1908). Actually, the rite derived its name – “sunnat” (Urazmanova, 2013) directly referring to the Sunnah of the Prophet.

On the one hand, this minor surgery brings adherents of Islam closer to the moral ideals of “asr al-saadat”, filling with the real meaning the expression “Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama’ah; on the other hand, in the initial realities of apartness of Islamic Tatars in the inland Russia, circumcision is an induction that allows performing religious prescriptions of the Muslim community along with other adherents.

For the majority of ulama at the early 20th century, the revival of the Sunnah was rather a pedagogical tool in the system of training of imams and the Muslim education in general. However, they emphasized markedly their elitism with non-verbal symbols (see “Bukhara fashion”).

2) The second sub-ethnicity is Ahl Islam, that is, Muslims in the broad sense of the word. For the local religious tradition, the Muslims are the foundation of the community and its essence, but insufficiently educated and diligent to seek the revival of the Sunnah to become part of the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama’ah. At the lay level of the interpretation, Ahl Islam is a set of formal features confirming your religious and ethnic identity. However, at the early 20th century, part of the religious elite developed not only formal, but the conceptual understandings of the Muslim identity in general in the lots of the believers.

The well-known theologian, Sheikh and subsequently Mufti Galimdzhan Barudi (1857-1921) clearly distinguishes the concepts of fardh, wajib and the Sunnah. A simple logic existed: one who denies fardh is unfaithful, one who denies wajib is a sinner; one who does not fulfil the Sunnah will be deprived of the grace of the Prophet (in the Muslim tradition, the 8th amal) (Barudi, 1917).

At the same time, Ahmad Khadi Maksudi (1868-1941), a scholar, linguist, teacher, described the same eight “actions” (amal) by degree in which they are obligatory, permissible and prohibited to the Muslims. These “actions” with both positive and negative connotations are some formal criteria that determine the attitude of a person to Islamic morals, and, consequently, the depth of his Islam. These “criteria” are defined from absolutely obligatory ones to absolutely forbidden ones.

- 1) Faridah (fardh): non-fulfillment is a sin, fulfillment implies a reward; one who does not recognize them as mandatory is unfaithful; the actions of faridah: The belief in the truth of Islam, five-time namaz, fasting in Ramadan, mandatory zakat, hajj.
- 2) Wajib: non-fulfillment is a sin, fulfillment implies a reward; non-recognition is a great sin; the actions of wajib: witr namaz, eid namaz, sadaqat al-fitr, sacrifice, etc.
- 3) Sunnah: non-fulfillment is not a sin, fulfillment implies the mercy of the Prophet Muhammad; the actions of the Sunnah: things are begun by saying “Bismillah”, reading the Koran is begun by saying “a’oodhu”, etc.
- 4) Mustahabb: non-fulfillment is not a sin, fulfillment implies a reward; the actions of mustahabb: reading additional pieces of namaz, etc.
- 5) Mubah: non-fulfillment is not a sin, fulfillment implies no reward; the actions of the mubah: eating halal food, standing, sitting, etc.
- 6) Haram: non-fulfillment is a norm, fulfillment is a great sin; the actions of haram: drinking alcohol, rumor mongering, theft, etc.
- 7) Makruh: non-fulfillment is a norm, fulfillment or approval is a sin; the actions of makruh: ill-mannered behavior, bad manners, etc.
- 8) Mustakruh: non-fulfillment is a norm, fulfillment is ill manners; the actions of mustakruh: eating on the street or in the market (in the places that are not so intended), sneezing without covering the mouth, loud burping, etc. (Maksudi, 1917).

R. Fahretdin offers that people should be guided by just two imperatives haram/halal (forbidden/ allowed) in everyday life; respectively, when abstaining from the forbidden, a person lives in compliance with “akhlaq” (morals) (Fahretdin, 2011).

The interpretation level of lay people did not differ with a detailed understanding of the essence of dogmatic nuances. Formal, primarily non-verbal features of the identity came to the fore. Humorous periodicals developed the image of conservative lay Muslims – the “Hay Market” (Pechan bazary). This word-combination has become a common word denoting a stronghold of conservatism and rejection of everything new. In 1908, the aforementioned poem “Hay Market” listed “Ü»le of bazaar” (people of the bazaar) as lay people, such as tanners, butchers, candle makers, butter workers and traders (Tukay, 2001). In 1909, the magazine “Lightning” (Yashen) wrote describing the “Hay Market”: “A button maker, a hatter, a shoemaker, a pedlar, a petty dealer, a coppersmith, a silversmith, an umbrella maker, a wool handler, a goat seller, a craftsman of frames, a baker, a taverner, a pilgrim, a rag-picker and other supporters of the “old” who gathered in a part of the Hay Marker .... decided to destroy everything new in the world ...”

(Yashen, 1909). As can be seen from the description, the crowd of “Ahl Islam”, lay people of the Tatar settlements and villages, were the essence of traditionalism.

In one of the issues of the reformist newspaper “Reform” (Al Islah), the author describes the appearance of an adept of the “hay market” ideology: “He neither goes to the theater, nor lets his hair grow, nor wears pants longer than his ankle ... counting the number of unfaithful Tatars of the Hay market” (Islah, 1909). This description of the appearance of the lay Muslims coincides with and is partly supplemented by the observation recorded according to Sagid, a peasant living in the village of Uluyaz, Kazan governorate: “...the Prophet Mohammed commanded to shave our heads in order to avoid uncleanness, but at to cutting the beard and mustache, it is sunnat”, “... he who lets [his beard grow long], does not adhere to our faith!” (Malov, 1892). Some researchers consider this a direct influence of Bukhara and call the “Bukhara fashion”. A. Frank is quite reasonable in his opinion that a Muslim associates the status of a Muslim with Muslim clothing, and, therefore, people wearing “Russian clothing” is suspected of withdrawal from the community and adopting Christianity (Frank, 2012).

In general, Tatar clothing looked like this: “Until recently, the Tatar men and women adhered strictly to ethnical clothing: shoes, Asian ichigi (boots), wide harem trousers, a long shirt with wide sleeves and a wide collar, a tubeteika cap, a cap, a khalat (loose long-sleeved robe) and a beshmet (long tunic-type shirt). Tatar women used a khalat to hide themselves from men’s eyes, too” (Speransky, 1914).

We should dwell in more detail on the perception of “Muslimism” and “Tatarism”. In assessing the appearance of seceded Kryashens (Christianized Tatars), A. Kefeli writes that the “Bukhara fashion” “with turbans and long robes” prevailed over the western clothing (Kefeli, 2014). Since the appearance of Muslim Tatars was associated with the culture and religion of the latter, it is worth quoting one of anti-Muslim works of the early 20th century, which defines the external features of non-Russian indigenous dwellers converted to Islam: “... men shave their heads and wear tubeteika caps, and women are dressed in a Tatar manner, perform ablutions from kumgans (copper jugs), pray five times a day, or, in addition, speak Tatar, receive the mullahs, then this is the strongest and most irrevocable degree of Tatarification” (Rybakov, 1909).

In this process, one of the main roles was played by the practices of double interpretation, that is, those having both a utilitarian and cultic, sacral significance. The latter may include a set of rites associated with hygiene and ritual cleanness. One of the health professionals observing the Tatars of the Kazan district, said that baths and ablutions in Islam are made to be considered as a strict religious rule (Sukharev, 1904).

One of the first attributes copied by neophytes was shaving heads, armpits and private parts (Sukharev, 1904). On the other hand, as mentioned above, admonitionists who used to come to “seceded” villages could be sure to determine

how widely Islam was spread in that village judging by the hairstyles of its inhabitants; the presence of “haired people” was believed (Bagautdinova & Iskhakov, 2015) to be a reliable pledge of hope that they would return to the bosom of Eastern Orthodoxy.

That is why reproducing the hygienic practices and features distressed enormously the missionaries, that is, if non-Russian indigenous dwellers (non-Muslims) wash their faces from kumgans (copper jugs used for ablutions), care to wash their feet (part of *taharah*), “are seated when drinking and in addition, like the Tatars, they try not to soak their clothes with the drink” (Rybakov, 1909), “they urinate while seated in a Tatar manner” (Sunnah) (Ilminskiy, 1885), this means that they have responded to Muslim “*dawah*” even though unconsciously, and this process can hardly be converted.

### **DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION**

In their works, a number of researchers addressed related problems, in particular, A. Frank (Frank, 2012) considered the Muslim identity in general and its formal criteria, R. Malikov (Malikov, 2013) focused on the position of *ulama* in the Tatar community, and A. Kefeli (Kefeli, 2014) developed the aspects of seceded Kryashens’ identity, etc. It should be emphasized that the previous studies considered the local model of Muslim mass self-awareness as something whole and as effects of the religious elite’s reflection. This work allows widening these concepts and look at lay people’s level of interpretation.

Thus, the Muslim identity in the Volga Region had two major interpretations of “Ahl al-Sunnah” as part of a self-awareness of *ulama* and “Ahl Islam” – Muslim lay people’s formalized idea of adherers of Islam. It must be noted that the features of the formal perception were actively used as a tool for Muslim proselytism in the Volga-Ural Region. However, at the early 20th century, part of the religious elite planted quite successfully the conceptual and content-related conceptions of Islamic identity among the heaps of believers, forming a clear religious self-awareness based on the regional model of “Ahl Islam”.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The article is of interest to religious scholars on Islam, experts in the daily life of Muslims of the Volga-Ural Region, ethnographers, researchers in the area of ceremonialism and religious life.

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