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# Discussing Tradition: A Response to Two Tatarstani Colleagues

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A recent publication (2019) by Leila Almazova and Azat Akhunov, part of a special issue of *Context* edited by Renat Bekkin, offers a sophisticated and timely assessment of the question of on "traditional Islam" (henceforth *traditsionny islam*) in the Republic of Tatarstan (Russian Federation). Based on an analysis of texts and statements produced by renowned Tatarstani ideologists, and including an extensive review of the recent English-language literature produced on this subject by scholars of different disciplinarian backgrounds, Almazova and Akhunov's article is one of the most ambitious and comprehensive scholarly pieces written to date on this subject. I am honoured that one paper of mine is included in their review. Almazova and Akhunov however voice a number of critical observations about key aspects of my work. Despite my respect for Almazova and Akhunov's experience and scholarship, I think that their review shows some epistemological misapprehensions. Furthermore, it mischaracterises aspects of my work in ways that warrant an ad-hoc response. In what follows, therefore, I would like to respond to the issues raised by my Tatarstani colleagues, while trying to advance some minor points of my own.

I do so in a spirit of amicable scholarly discussion rather than with a polemical intent: as the special issue's editor, Renat Bekkin, beautifully put it, "the principal difference between a polemic and a discussion is that the goal of the latter is to find a consensus. The goal of polemic is the triumph of only one point of view" (Bekkin 2019: p. 66, n.2). Given that Almazova and Akhunov's literature review covers contributions ranging from a variety of disciplines and scholarly traditions, I am happy to take their criticism as an opportunity to identify some issues that, if left unaddressed, risk growing into obstacles hindering our collective pursuit of consensus.

1) Let me start from the most minor concern voiced by Almazova and Akhunov: the fact that I anonymise my participants ("respondents are not named," 2019, p. 22). This is common practice in anthropological literature. Almazova and Akhunov correctly assume that my sources include, but are far from limited to, "ideologists" of *traditsionny islam*: these tend to be public figures, accustomed to the attentions of journalists as well as academic practitioners. Like most anthropologists, however, I do not disclose the identities of any interlocutor, including official personalities, unless I have a specific (scholarly) reason to do so. A general point about the division of scholarly labour can perhaps be made. Philologically trained social scientists, political scientists, area studies specialists, etc. tend to work on élite-produced written sources and/or derive their authority from "the names and statuses of the officials with whom they held discussions": it is not so for anthropologists (Good 2006, p. 105), who are primarily interested in the global social dynamics of a certain setting and in teasing out the voices of the rank-and-file at the ground level.
2) This leads me to the fact that fieldwork-based anthropological contributions (not only mine, but also those of other "Western scholars") may feature few or no Tatar-language bibliography entries, another concern that Almazova and Akhunov raise (2019, p. 24). The colleagues' exhortation to engage with Tatar-language sources falls on receptive ears. At a time in which global academia interrogates itself over decolonisation and the inclusion of long-marginalised voices, their remark is a very important one that I accept with the promise to be more attentive to this issue. Still, ethnographers rely primarily on *oral* materials in the languages of their fieldwork location, and secondarily on a scholarly apparatus in the languages of academic discussion: a domain in which, regrettably, Tatar is as yet underrepresented. This is not a universal rule (I have used Tatar-language written sources elsewhere), and certainly not an excuse to avoid actively seeking greater exposure to academic and non-academic literature in Tatar, but it is one factor that I hope Almazova and Akhunov may take into consideration in assessing the works of scholars operating in non-text-based disciplines.
3) Another point of criticism expressed by Almazova and Akhunov concerns the fact that after characterising *traditsionny islam* as a state-driven political-ideological project, I give room to the perspectives of those who may feel antagonised or marginalised by this project (i.e. grassroots Muslim pietists). That such a move should be a problem is surprising since Almazova and Akhunov, too, observe that "the word 'tradition' tends to be *used as a weapon* in the *state* authorities' discourse," adding that the concept of *traditsionny islam* has been "*introduced* primarily by the state" (pp. 14, 43, emphases

added). However, according to these authors I should not have included the voices of people against whom this discursive weapon is wielded: "judging the nature of a phenomenon on the basis of what its adversaries think about it *is a dead-end*" leading to "speculations" (p. 22, emphasis added). With the greatest respect, I have no choice but to reject this line of criticism. Such an epistemological injunction would be considered untenable under any anthropological paradigm I am familiar with. I believe that the opposite is true: no description of a social process, especially if it involves hegemonic actors, can be called accurate unless we attempt to include the subaltern viewpoints as well, all the more so because subaltern experiences rarely find their way into the written sphere. Although no individual journal article can exhaust such a complex matter, that is what my contribution tried to offer.

4) Almazova and Akhunov state that my paper "would have been of interest" had the "opponent of traditionalists" "been defined categorically" (p. 23), a complaint they voice about the works of other anthropologists as well (p. 24). I take this to mean some kind of classification of shades and types of piety: they specifically name Salafist vs. intellectual moderates vs. devout Sufis. Again, we may have to agree to disagree. Almazova and Akhunov do not explain what such a move would have added to my argument, which deals with the relationship between pious Muslims and the state, nor do they elaborate on why the interest or validity of any social analysis should rest on the application of these (far from unproblematic) categories. I am convinced that epistemological strategies vary as a matter of course across disciplines, national traditions, and individual intellectual trajectories: in many cases, contemporary anthropologists tend to be wary of taxonomies, classifications, and labels (Pels 2014). In fact, in my paper I *explicitly* state that pigeonholing people on theological grounds would have been of little analytical import for my purposes (Benussi 2020 [2019], p. 112). By contrast, in earlier published work I do offer a classification of piety groups (Benussi 2017, referenced in my paper) even though I am no longer particularly comfortable with such a move (and have no reason to repeat myself anyway).

5) This leads me to the "methodological doubts" that Almazova and Akhunov raise about my work (p. 23). They apparently mistake the term "halal movement," which I use to frame a wave of social ferment around halal awareness, to mean a structured Islamic (Islamist?) underground organisation advancing "ideological policies" under the banner/moniker of halal (p. 23). Such a misunderstanding occurs despite my clarifications to the effect that *a)* this concept is a second-order term for an otherwise nameless phenomenon ("what *I call* Russia's 'halal movement'," emphasis added); *b)* it indicates a

"loose" "milieu" of pietists within which different theological orientations coexist; *c)* this milieu is based on "shared commitment to an Islamic ethical project" and "concern with religious accuracy, correctness, and purity," with no mention of policy goals, ideological or otherwise; and *d)* I deliberately choose to call this group "halal movement," after hearing this term being used by interlocutors, to avoid "theological labels" which might give an erroneous sense of compactness (Benussi 2020 [2019], pp. 112-113).

Nevertheless, Almazova and Akhunov seemingly went to the length of organising a "poll" (p. 23) among Tatarstani Muslims (including "representatives of Islamic fundamentalism") to ascertain whether an organisation calling itself the Halal Movement is active in the Republic's political-ideological underground, reporting (unsurprisingly) that they could not locate any. Thereupon, they proceed to declaring this elusive formation "non-existent" (p. 24). Alas, it seems that my colleagues spent time and resources in a ghost hunt for the sake of disproving a point I never tried to make.

Of course, there is a lesson for me to learn here. In anthropology, making second-order terminological choices necessarily involves an element of trial-and-error. I remain convinced that "movement" is a good descriptor, being *a)* directly inspired by some interlocutors' own way of talking about Muslims' collective enthusiasm about halal, and *b)* congruous with anthropology's well-established naming conventions around Islamic "piety/mosque/revival *movements*" (Hirschkind 2006; Mahmood 2012). But I am grateful to my colleagues for revealing a potential for misinterpretation that I underestimated. I acknowledge the importance of avoiding ambiguity and am receptive to criticism in this regard. Even though Almazova and Akhunov's criticism seems to come from a place of misapprehension rather than one of close intellectual engagement, it is nonetheless useful: in the future I will take measures to avoid similar interpretive hiccups.

6) The main point of contention, I believe, is one that Almazova and Akhunov do not explicitly formulate: it does, however, show behind their "methodological" criticisms. The authors seem to take issue with my paper's state-unfriendly, so to speak, stance vis-à-vis *traditisionny islam*, which I characterise (not exclusively, but mostly) in "negative" biopolitical terms as a tool of repression (cf. point 3). Through their exploration of texts produced by *traditsionny islam*'s ideologists, by contrast, Almazova and Akhunov bring to the fore a more "positive" side of it – though they do not use this terminology. They reveal it as a complex moral discourse that draws upon Tatarstan's local moral repositories, either vernacular (Fazlyev's "ethnographic" Islam, p. 26) or erudite (Yakupov's attempted nationalisation of Hanafism into a Tatar

"madhhab culture," p. 30). They seek to illustrate these ideologists' genuine struggles in keeping scriptural-universalist and ethno-localist elements under a single framework (Samigullin's aporias, p. 35), their attempts to preserve religious awareness while embracing a secular lifestyle (Nurgaleev's Muslim New Year, p. 36), or their arguments in favour of an overhaul of Sunnism's moral order (Batrov's post-hadithic renovationism, only passingly mentioned here, p. 40 n. 123, but cf. Bekkin 2019). This "positive" reading is theoretically shored up by creatively, if somewhat hesitantly, juxtaposing *traditsionny islam* to Talal Asad's notion of discursive tradition (pp. 14-15).

Almazova and Akhunov's project is important and it illuminates an aspect of *traditsionny islam* that my paper does not, admittedly, do full justice to – although perhaps they could have expressed this opinion (if that was indeed the goal) in a more explicit and constructive fashion. Be that as it may, I am happy to admit that there *is* a positive, morally generative side to *traditsionny islam* that ought to be included in social analyses of the phenomenon.

Luckily, no fundamental incompatibility exists between our respective viewpoints. In fact, a degree of overlap is already discernible, as I am sure Almazova and Akhunov themselves will appreciate considering that I devoted an entire section of my paper to "theological traditional Islam" as a civil society project (hence a form of "positive," rather than repressive, pastoral power). In any case, I will be pleased to pursue deeper engagements with their argument in future analyses of this subject.

7) One further point of discussion might be the extent to which an Asadian framework can shed light on the moral life of *traditsionny islam*. On the one hand it does, inasmuch as it illuminates "tradition" as a mechanism of subject formation. On the other hand it may take us only so far, since the understandings of "tradition" and "orthodoxy" in *traditsionny islam* vis-à-vis the Asadian concept are fundamentally divergent, as Almazova and Akhunov themselves observe (the former's identarian framing of tradition implying no "understanding" of the scriptural "content" of the latter, pp. 14, 37 n. 107). I salute their choice not to overcommit to an Asadian framework. Asad's discursive tradition pertains to the cultivation of virtues in conformity with a divinely revealed set of instructions, the Quran and Sunna (Asad 2009 [1986], p. 20). It allows for historical and cultural variation, but ultimately goes back to Islam's written foundations, leaving little room for the local or ethnic customs, national identities, and cultural memories that are key to *traditsionny islam* (pp. 26ff., 31, 32-33, 36-37). Because of its scripturalist bias, the Asadian concept of discursive tradition has in fact been often applied to doctrinarian reform movements of the type that the ideologists

> of *traditsionny islam* oppose, such as Salafists and Islamists, who in Russia get branded as forms of "*non*-traditional" (*netraditsionny*) Islam (Hirschkind 2006; Mahmood 2012; Fadil and Fernando 2015).

Precisely in order to avoid Asad's scripturalist bias, several anthropologists exploring the quotidian practices of non-pietist Muslims have developed a conceptual framework emphasising "everyday moralities," "ordinary Muslimness," and the "fragilities" of virtue (Marsden 2005; Rasanayagam 2011; Lambek 2012; Schielke 2015; Montgomery 2016; Pelkmans 2017; Louw 2018). Perhaps an interdisciplinary engagement with this body of literature, which foregrounds vernacular spirituality, local value systems, and the co-existence of secular and religiously-inspired moral repertoires, will prove conducive to a greater understanding of *traditsionny islam*. I look forward to exploring this avenue in conversation with my senior Tatarstani colleagues' work.

I hope this response has assuaged Almazova and Akhunov's concerns. I reiterate my gratitude to my Tatarstani colleagues for reading my work and raising some actionable points of reflection. I much appreciate the research-based component of their contribution, even though I must reject most of their criticism. I am convinced that their most abrasive remarks about my work can be explained in terms of *a)* epistemological misapprehensions about the premises, goals, and conventions of anthropological analysis, and/or *b)* a superficial engagement with my arguments.

None of this is unheard-of in academia and it may be chalked up to differences in intellectual styles across disciplinarian and national borders. It only becomes problematic when, no doubt without meaning it, my senior colleagues call into question my intellectual or methodological integrity. I emphasise that I do not assume that everybody, everywhere, has to be familiar with the ways in which sociocultural anthropology operates: hence my willingness to clarify things. I have certainly learned from this exchange and am optimist that friendly conversations with Leila Almazova and Azat Akhunov will continue in the future.

I entertain no doubts that this response will be received in the same spirit of academic friendship with which I offer it. As I hope to have showed, our respective trajectories have a margin of overlap to build on, and even our disagreements can be illuminating and generative as long as we engage with each other's work in an intellectually generous way. We all stand to gain from mutual engagement, frank conversations, as well as vivacious and amicable interdisciplinary and international discussions.

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