

In the Land of Giants: Eco-Mythology and Islamic Authority in the Post-Soviet Tatar Imagination

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In her study of the gigantic as a metaphor for longing, Susan Stewart contends that in its western evolution, the gigantic moved away from the magical and the religious to the secular and the vernacular. In pre-industrial cultures, stories about giants explained the environment: they molded the land and represented the untamed forces of nature. Often associated with loneliness and otherness, they were disorderly, cannibalistic, and hostile. Later, toward the end of the Middle Ages, as the marketplace developed, they became incorporated into city carnivals as symbols of local identity, patriotism, and as founders of guilds. In this new setting, the giants retained elements of their past truculence and excessiveness in their parody of gender, church, and secular authority. Ultimately, in Stewart's market-driven interpretation, the giants evolved into a form of unlimited consumption, advertisement, or entertainment—Mr. Clean or Disney characters—which led to the emergence of an abstract image of commodity and anonymity.¹

The study of the Volga Tatar gigantic challenges Susan Stewart's premise of an irreversible evolution from enchantment to disenchanted secularization. Even Stewart, who draws much of her inspiration from Marxist criticism, acknowledges that during the Renaissance, giants of northern Europe could also be symbols of piety as they were paraded along with figures of saints.² In the 1970s, Soviet Tatar authors used the gigantic as a positive metaphor for longing: longing for those who had left the village to fight multiple wars or longing for those who had left for the oil fields of Baku. Most important, well

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1. Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore, 1984), 70–84.

2. Stewart, *On Longing*, 81. Walter Stephens, in his study of Rabelais's giants, rightly noted that Stewart and Mikhail Bakhtin ignored the religious dimension of giants before the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, citing the example of the giant Saint Christopher, a model of Christian virtue and martyrdom. Walter Stephens, *Giants in Those Days: Folklore, Ancient History, and Nationalism* (Lincoln, 1989), 34–50.

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before the so-called “post-Soviet revival of Islam” in Eurasia, village prose writers used the gigantic to affirm not only their national but also their religious identity. Longing for the return of Islamic values and spirituality, they did not regard the giant as the wild, menacing, and foreign “other,” but as the symbol of their ancestral faith—more precisely as a communalizing force based on moral principles inspired by their Islamic cultural past. This challenged the Soviet Tatar folklorists’ premise that Islam was a foreign religion and that it had stifled folk-national identity.³ The gigantic became one of the manifestations of Soviet Islam. After the fall of the Soviet Union, it became a tool for further routinizing proper Islamic practices. In short, in Soviet and post-Soviet times, the giants were not just products of folkloric fantasy or childhood enchantment. Besides challenging Soviet national cartography, they constituted an important source of religious identity and authority while echoing deep ecological and cultural anxieties.⁴ Indeed, the study of the Tatar gigantic confirms Stewart’s claim that the gigantic serves as a metaphor for historical change and collective identity, but it also shows that the gigantic still plays an enchanted role in the reconfiguration of religious identity in secular societies.⁵

The giants of Turkic legends did not differ much from the colossi of Germanic and English tales. They fashioned the Middle Volga and Uralic landscape of Eurasia, turning themselves into stones or creating hills or mountains with the mud attached to their shoes. In his inquiry into the giants in western medieval literature, Jeffrey Cohen noted that medieval England was comprised of a heterogeneous collection of people, and giants became “central to the formation of a new collective ideology of identity.”⁶ Similarly, Tatarstan was home to Turkic, Finno-Ugric, and Slavic people of different faiths, and the migration to the cities in and outside Tatarstan after the Second World War provoked an identity crisis, exposing Tatars to the possible loss of their native language or loss of ethnic and religious cohesiveness. The break-up of the Soviet Union generated even more anxieties: Muslim Tatars feared losing their demographic dominance as Kriashens (Christian Tatars) affirmed their distinct ethnic and religious identity. Some Tatars showed interest in various forms of esotericism. Others left Islam for Protestantism and Eastern Orthodoxy while some Russians blurred the boundaries further by converting

3. See for instance Fatykh Urmancheev, *Geroicheskie epos tatarskogo naroda* (Kazan, 1984), 23, 115, and Näkiy Isänbät, *Tatar khalik mäkal’läre*, 3 vols. (Kazan, 2010), 1:67, 89. For transliterating Tatar, I follow Edward Allworth’s transliteration system as given in *Nationalities of the Soviet East: Publications and Writing Systems* (New York, 1971).

4. By Islamic authority, I draw from Devin DeWeese’s definition that religious authority is not solely conveyed verbally by recognized specialists of Islamic knowledge. There can be other modes of knowledge transmission and signs of authority such as dreams, objects, shrines, and landscapes. Devin DeWeese, “Authority,” Jamal J. Elias, ed., *Key Themes for the Study of Islam* (Oxford, 2010), 26–52.

5. Stewart, *On Longing*, xii, 172. On the reconfiguration of the religious in the European and Soviet contexts, see Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *La religion pour mémoire* (Paris, 1993), 8, 10, 60, 134, 256, and Miriam Dobson, “The Social Scientist Meets the “Believer”: Discussions of God, the Afterlife, and Communism in the Mid-1960s,” *Slavic Review* 74, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 79–103.

6. Jeffrey Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis, 1999), xiv.

to Islam. New waves of migrants from Central Asia, who might share their faith but not necessarily their history, threatened the dominance of the Tatar language in mosques. Simultaneously, Tatars constituted a Muslim diaspora outside their titular republic in an overwhelmingly Christian or post-Christian environment. They were left to bear and fix the ecological consequences of the Soviet industrial and nuclear experiment, as they mourned the flooding of ancient cemeteries in the construction of massive hydroelectric stations, the defacing of their sacred meadows through intensive monoculture, and the loss of irradiated villages in the 1957 nuclear disaster of Kyshtym in the southern Urals. Giants provided a map based on a sacred lineage against a Marxist reading that rejected Islam as alien. In other words, the gigantic constitutes one of the least investigated manifestations of Soviet and post-Soviet Islamic authority.⁷

The goal of this article is not to provide a taxonomy of Turkic giants in Tatar folklore, but to demonstrate their relevance in the conversational context of the 1990s and 2010s. Like the Yokai monsters of Japan or the trolls of Scandinavia, Turkic giants reflected the major societal changes caused by urbanization, modernization, and globalization.⁸ Following the break-up of the Soviet Union, they occupied the imagination of many Tatars—occultists, neopagans, and nationalist novelists—who turned to folklore to draw their own sacralized cartography. Because of her influence on school curricula, I focus on the writer Fäüziyâ Bâyrâmovâ (b. 1950), who is mainly known in western scholarship as the fire-brand founder of the Tatar nationalist party *Ittifak* (Union). Her Tatar-language fiction, along with the works of renowned village prose writers, occupies a prominent position in the new ecological curricula in Tatar public schools. Using her published travel diaries, I first analyze Bâyrâmovâ's reworking of medieval genealogies and village histories before examining her fictional work. I show how the political activist and former member of the Union of Soviet Writers transformed earlier Soviet manifestations of literary religious self-identification, and how she responded to contemporary folkloristic, occultist, neopagan, and other contemporary ethnic discourses. While her diaries addressed a large public, her novels targeted a younger audience and their parents. In both modes of writing, however, giants serve as transmitters of Islamic knowledge, and project a multi-layered understanding of Islam, either traditionalist or modernist, that defies easy categorization. Based on scriptures, reconstructed local genealogies, village histories, indigenous origin tales, sacred landmarks, Bâyrâmovâ's ethnonationalist gigantology is framed within the confines of Soviet Tatar kolkhoz-village literature and post-Soviet esoteric literature. Her colossi, anchored in the land, fulfill the same purpose as the Sufi shrine catalogues of the past that

7. Charles Carlson, "Tatarstan: Kreshens Spark Debate on Ethnic Identity," Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, at <https://www.rferl.org/a/1104484.html> (accessed March 19, 2022); Väliulla Yag' kub, *Tatar telle mächetläreneng yazmishi häm kilächäge* (Kazan, 2005); Amina Kolesnikova, "Budushchee za liud'mi ognia," in D. K. Valeeva, ed., *Libertus ili Liutsifer? K analizu tvorchestva Diasa Valeeva: Stat'i, esse, razmyshleniia*, 2nd ed. (Kazan, 2011), 456–59.

8. Michael Dylan Foster, *The Book of Yokai: Mysterious Creatures of Japanese Folklore* (Oakland, 2015); John Lindow, *Trolls: An Unnatural History* (London, 2014).

challenged Russian colonialism.⁹ They design a cartography that both questions the legitimacy of Soviet borders and serves as a call for religious renewal and ecological healing.

Bäyrämova's gigantology communicates a great sense of continuity with the prerevolutionary and the Soviet religious pasts, suggesting that society was far from disenchanting during the Soviet era. It also challenges the binary categories of localized Sufi Islam and so-called "delocalized" Salafi-oriented Islam. Bäyrämova's giants, embedded in Soviet eco-Islam, mediate between two discourses that scholars of Islam often view as mutually exclusive, one encouraging the visit of sacred places, and the other, more conservative, attacking their religious legitimacy in the name of God's unity. Ultimately, these two discourses, reflected in Bäyrämova's gigantology, could potentially complement each other in their projection of Islamic authority onto the land and its people.¹⁰

Fäüziyâ Bäyrämova's Sacred History and Geography in Her Travelogues

In western historiography, Bäyrämova is known primarily as the head of *Ittifak*, a nationalist party that called for the establishment of a Tatar Islamic state. Despite her controversial positions, Bäyrämova also elicited great admiration. In 1991, objecting to the conduct of presidential elections in the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), she led a two-week hunger strike in Kazan on Freedom Square: in her view, Russia's recognition of Tatarstan's sovereignty rendered Moscow's presidential elections obsolete. In 2002–2003, she personally visited irradiated Tatar villages in the Cheliabinsk region, demanding reparations. Many Tatars, even those who are critical of her temperament, applaud her struggle against corruption and her efforts to promote the Tatar language. Her literary activity is not as well known in the west. As a result, the broader religious dimension of the Tatar nationalist movement is often overlooked.¹¹

9. Allen Frank, *Islamic Historiography and 'Bulghar' Identity among the Tatars and Bashkirs of Russia* (Leiden, Netherlands, 1998).

10. Alfrid Bustanov, along with Allen Frank, has challenged the assumption that Salafism was imported to Tatarstan and that its Tatar exponents were solely Russophone internationalists. I argue that Bäyrämova could be viewed as an example of Tatarophone Salafism, but her writing is ambiguous enough to leave room for the consolidation, revival, or creation of new sacred places. See Alfrid K. Bustanov, "The Language of Moderate Salafism in Eastern Tatarstan," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 28, no. 2 (3 April 2017): 183–201.

11. Dmitri P. Gorenburg, *Minority Ethnic Mobilization in the Russian Federation* (Cambridge, Eng., 2003), 1, 56, 89–92, 124–125; Sergei Kondrashov, *Nationalism and the Drive for Sovereignty in Tatarstan, 1988–92* (New York, 2000), 83, 134, 162, 164. Regarding Bäyrämova's trips to the Cheliabinsk region, see Fäüziyâ Bäyrämova, *Taralip yatkan tatar ile* (Kazan, 2003), 23–30, 60–82, 84–100. A mixed portrayal of Bäyrämova can be found in Tufan Mingnullin, "Fäüziyâ Bäyrämova," *Kazan Utları* 1077, no. 7 (July 2012): 155–59. For more on the historical context of Islam in the early post-Soviet period, see Marlene Laruelle, "The Struggle for the Soul of Tatar Islam," in *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 5 (2007): 26–39.

Giants represent a central theme in Bāyrāmova's writings. In her published travel diaries that constitute the basis of her fictional work, Bāyrāmova addressed an adult readership, advancing a genealogy and cartography of the Turkic giants that are central to her mythologization of Tatar religious identity. She mentioned heroic epics (*dastan*), especially those shared by Kazan Tatars, Siberian Tatars, and Bashkirs, such as Alpamış (Alpamsha in Kazan Tatar) and Ural-Batır, whose giant-sized heroes featured courage and chivalresque valor.¹² But her interest did not go beyond their names and places of origin. In fact, she focused primarily on the landscape-shaping giants mentioned in shorter local tales (*rivayät*), which provided her with a malleable genealogy of Abrahamic-Qur'anic origin that could be retrospectively applied to epics, thus correcting the Soviet presumption that epics lacked Islamic authenticity.

For Bāyrāmova, the epics were not superficially Islamized vestiges from pre-Islamic times. Instead, once linked to landscape-shaping giants and their sacred Islamic genealogy, the epic heroes Alpamsha and Ural-Batır would join the ranks of the gigantic prophets of Islam and ultimately legitimize Tatar ownership of the lands stretching from Kazan to Siberia. But first, she had to construct a genealogy that supported both her religious and nationalistic claims, an enterprise akin to European Renaissance genealogical reconstructions of royal authority. Bāyrāmova's gigantology was more reminiscent of the fifteenth-century Renaissance Italian Dominican monk Annius Viterbensis who turned giants into positive agents and sources of legitimacy than to early medieval writings about giants. No longer bestial "others" that royals conquered to assert their power, they became royal ancestors. Noah and his family were "good" giants who colonized the European mainland, anticipating François Rabelais' positive giants as transmitters of a new humanistic culture and a reforming Christianity. Similarly, Bāyrāmova's giants were both proto-historical colonizers of the land and the guardians of a reformed Islamic knowledge that she aimed to routinize.¹³

Bāyrāmova's Genealogical Argumentation

Already in the nineteenth century, ethnographers and archaeologists, such as the Russian Sergei Shpilevskii, had noted the importance of landscape-shaping giants throughout Kazan province. For Tatars, he wrote, the kurgans along the Mesha River dated back to the times of the giants. Other local legends characterized those tumuli as commemorative monuments over sacred graves, and people believed that they contained weapons and treasures of precious stones. These mounds were called giant graves (*alip kabere*, *alip kurgani*), or places where the giant struck [the earth] with his bast shoes (*alip chabasın kakkın jirläre*). Five or six years before Shpilevskii's visit, a Russian had attempted to settle near one of these kurgans but left precipitously

12. On Alpamış and its many variations across the Turkic world, see Karl Reichl, *Turkic Oral Epic Poetry: Traditions, Forms, Poetic Structure* (New York, 1992); more specifically on Alpamsha in the Kazan and Siberian Tatar contexts, see Marsel' Bakirov, *Tatarskii fol' klor* (Kazan, 2012), 183–88.

13. Craig R. Davis "An Ethnic Dating of Beowulf," *Anglo-Saxon England* 35 (2006): 111–29; Stephens, *Giants in Those Days*, 100–9, 192.

after seeing an old Tatar with a gray beard in the middle of the night warning him of imminent death. Was it a dream, asked Shpilevskii, a hallucination, or did a real Tatar from the neighboring village appear to him? No one could say. However, the perceptive archaeologist understood that locals could not suffer the presence of a Russian outsider on these sacred grounds.¹⁴

For Bähräмова, those giants' graves were more than sites of strange phenomena. They were the bearers of a forgotten sacred genealogy that dated back to the very first prophets cited in the Qur'an. A new collection of tales (*rivayät*), published during perestroika and based on material collected in the 1920s and the late 1960s–80s, provided Bähräмова with a variety of genealogies that she corrected for her own nationalistic purposes, eliminating any ambiguity regarding Tatar ethnogenesis. One legend from the Arsk district, a demographically compact Tatar region where Bähräмова spent her childhood, tied the giants to the first Prophet Adam. Bähräмова had to edit a second legend, transcribed by the Tatar folklorist Säyed Vakhidov in the 1920s, for it failed to identify giants as solely Tatars. The hero of this tale, the giant Alip, which simply means "giant" in several Turkic languages, was the third son of Japheth, the son of the biblical-Qur'anic Noah. After moving north to the Volga, Alip reshaped the entire landscape, crushing small mountains and creating new hills out of the mud he tossed from his bast shoes. His wife whom he met near the Volga River gave birth to two sons, Bolghar (founder of the Bolghar kingdom) and Bortas (another clan).¹⁵ To make Vakhidov's original tale fit her ideological requirements, Bähräмова made Alip the son of Turk (*Törek*), the ancestor of the Volga Tatars. In this new configuration, the Bolghars were unequivocally the ancestors of today's Turco-Tatars, and not the ancestors of the Chuvash, whom Soviet Tatar historians, in their eagerness to solidify their territorial Bolghar-Tatar identity, had characterized not as Turkic but as a Turkified Finno-Ugric people.¹⁶

Bähräмова insisted that traditional stories about giants were not simply myths or old wives' tales but reliable accounts.¹⁷ Using the same method as the nineteenth-century Tatar encyclopedist Kayum Nasiyri, who grappled with similar scientific skepticism, she first alluded to the same Muslim exegesis that described antediluvian prophets as giants, then to the same historical testimonies and folk tales, and last to the same hard evidence. As recorded in the Qur'an and *Qisas al-Anbiya'* (Stories of the Prophets) familiar to Volga Tatars, God increased the stature of the 'Ad people who later refused to yield

14. S. M. Shpilevskii, *Drevnie goroda i drugie bulgarsko-tatarskie pamiatniki v Kazanskoi gubernii* (Kazan, 1877), 386, 397, 500.

15. S. M. Giyläjeddinov, ed., *Tatar khalik ijati: Rivayätläär häm legendalar* (Kazan, 1987), 20–21, 293.

16. *Tatar khalik ijati: Rivayätläär häm legendalar*, 293–94; Fäüziyä Bähräмова, "Nukh päygambär köymäse," in *Tufannan taralgan tatarlar* (Kazan, 2004), 177; Fäüziyä Bähräмова, "Kaharman tatarlar," *Söyembikä*, at <http://syuyumbike.ru/news/istoriya/kaarman-tatarlar> (accessed June 30, 2020); Victor A. Shnirel'man, *Who Gets the Past? Competition for Ancestors among Non-Russian Intellectuals in Russia* (Washington DC; Baltimore, 1996), 22–35.

17. Bähräмова insists that these genealogies are literally true, not simply social constructions, as the professional Tatar historians, Mirkasiym Gosmanov, Damir Iskhaikov, and Marsel' Äkhmätjanov argue. Bähräмова, *Taralip yatkan tatar ile*, 102–7.

to their prophet's message. Historical figures such as the representative of the Abbasid empire, Ahmad ibn Fadlan, who traveled to the Middle Volga in the tenth century and had seen the remains of a giant, and the Andalusian Abu Hamid al-Gharnati, who visited Bolghar in the twelfth century, confirmed the presence of giants too large to fit into the local bathhouses. One such colossus, who stood 53 feet tall, could take a horse under his arm, tear an elephant in two with his bare hands, and uproot trees. Every village of the Bolghar land had its own giant stories, and Nikolai Skariatina, the famous governor of Kazan in 1866–80, had shipped huge bones discovered in the village of Teläche (Mamadysh district) to St. Petersburg. For Bāyramova, this fully validated the travelers' accounts, Tatar traditions, and the veracity of Islamic scriptures.¹⁸

Once again, however, Bāyramova shaped her sources to fit her religious views and nationalistic ideology. Oversized creatures in traditional texts were often tied to otherness, but hers were indigenous, penitent, and good. The Bolghar Khan Almish portrayed giants as repulsive naked fishermen from outside his realm, and Ibn Fadlan condemned them as savage representatives of Gog and Magog—wild, barbarian tribes, whose destructive power would be loosed upon the world just before the Day of Judgment.¹⁹ Similarly, the famous *Idegäy* epic set during the final years of the Golden Horde, the medieval tale *Kisek-Bash* (The Severed Head), or the folkloric tale of *Tang Batir* (The Knight of Dawn) portrayed giants as inhumane lustful monsters, keeping women captive and threatening their honor.²⁰ Bāyramova, however, ignored those oversized demons, privileging indigenous folk traditions that portrayed giants as earthly and gentle creatures, foreshadowing the advent of a new nation of dedicated farmers—a sharp contrast with the stereotypical Russian image of Muslim Tatars as perpetual aggressors and “uncivilized,” ruthless, nomadic people.²¹ One such tale, also found in Udmurt, Chuvash, and Germanic folklore, recalled that a giant mother had reproved her child for picking up a human farmer; one day, she prophesied, those tiny industrious creatures would take their place and rule the earth. In the end, for Bāyramova, the giants were not associated with alterity, but with the Tatars' ancestors; they would become exemplars of piety and beauty, whose graves

18. Nasīyri specifically referred to Qur'an, 7:69, a verse often used by various commentators to describe the size of the 'Ad people. Kayum Nasīyri, “Alīp adāmnār,” (originally printed in 1883) in Kayum Nasīyri, *Saylanma üsälär*, 4 vols. (Kazan, 2005), 3:166–67. On outsized prophets in Muslim exegesis, see Brannon M. Wheeler, *Mecca and Eden: Ritual, Relics, and Territory in Islam* (Chicago, 2006), 112–17; on the people of 'Ad as a giant-sized people in one Turkic source familiar to the Volga Tatars, see Al-Rabghūzi, *The Stories of the Prophets, Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā': An Eastern Turkish Version*, 2 vols., trans. H. E. Boeschoten, J. O'Kane, and M. Vandamme (Leiden, Netherlands, 1995), 2:72; Bāyramova, *Taralip yatkan tatar ile*, 162–64.

19. Rizaeddin Fākhretdin, “Ibne Fazlanning Bolgarga kilüe,” in *Näsel-iruübiz küskacha tarikhübiz* (Kazan, 2008), 74–75; Aḥmad Ibn Faḍlān, *Ibn Fadlan's Journey to Russia: A Tenth-Century Traveler from Baghdad to the Volga River*, introduction by Richard N. Frye (Princeton, 2005), 58–59.

20. *Idegäy: Tatar khalik dastani*, introduction by Ilbaris N. Nadirov (Kazan, 1988), 88–108; see also the Karakalpak version of *Idegäy*, in Karl Reichl, *Singing the Past: Turkic and Medieval Heroic Poetry* (Ithaca, 2000), 121; *Kisek Bash* (Kazan, 1846).

21. Marat Gibatdinov, “The Image of Islam in Tatar and Russian History Textbooks,” *Internationale Schulbuchforschung* 29, no. 3 (2007): 273–87.

dotted the hilly landscape of the Volga-Urals region. For moral instruction, however, Bährämovä retained the tradition that the giants were a disappearing race who had refused to listen to their divinely inspired prophet, and so had gone extinct. This tragedy could also be the fate of her nation if Tatars failed to return to Islamic orthopraxy.²²

Bährämovä's Cartography and its Ethnic Sacredness

Bährämovä's treatment of her home region of Saba illustrates her theological reading of the Tatar landscape and its toponyms. Ignoring the work of linguists and geographers, Bährämovä claimed that Saba was directly related to the Qur'anic story of the Queen of Saba (Sheba) who converted to Islam when she visited the prophet King Solomon.²³ In Bährämovä's cosmology, the land of Saba constituted a contested sacred space: on the one hand, it contained memories of a scriptural past that needed to be guarded for future generations, and on the other, it needed spiritual reform. Saba was the original home of giants of the size of the prophet Adam who, according to a prophetic hadith, measured thirty meters in height and three to four meters in width. Tantalizing evidence to the existence of such giants included testimonies of medieval foreign travelers, the recent discovery of dinosaur bones near Äzmä village, topographic names and legends that referred to gigantic ancestors. According to one legend, a giant, six meters tall, founded the village of Timershik and created its sacred spring by piercing the earth with his spear. Even in the Soviet period, the spring attracted many local pilgrims. Although she discouraged pilgrims from praying at the spring, Bährämovä praised the water's medicinal properties and scolded Tatars who drank alcohol on such holy grounds. To anchor the region's landscape further into Qur'anic times, Bährämovä also suggested that the mount of Khidr-Ata (Father-Khidr) in Mingär, another neighboring village, was the resting place of Khidr, a prophet sent, in her view, specifically to the Tatar people (even though the Qur'an did not mention Khidr, "the Green One," by name as one of God's messengers).²⁴

Indeed, for Bährämovä, these sacred hills and springs were central to her people's national and religious identity; they contained the memory of the Tatars' tragic past. Close to her native village, the mount of Uternias' (Öternäs) still contained the remains of the second capital of the Tatar khanate, built in 1553 after the Russian conquest of Kazan, and mercilessly razed by Ivan the Terrible a year later. Bährämovä acknowledged the past presence of Finno-Ugric Maris: a cemetery and one of the springs had Mari names, and many of the population's genealogical trees included Mari ancestors, but those families had long converted to Islam, and their pagan ancestors had been the Tatars'

22. *Tatar khalik ijati: Rivayätlär häm legendalar*, 23, 250–52, 295; Bährämovä, *Taralip yatkan tatar ile*, 163–65; Stewart, *On Longing*, 73.

23. Bährämovä, *Taralip yatkan tatar ile*, 160–61; "Saba" (tradition reported by Khämidulla Khujiäkhmäto in 1981) in *Tatar khalik ijati: Rivayätlär häm legendalar*, 162–63, 330; museum pamphlet: *Saba rayoni, Tatarstan respublikasi* (Saba, no date), 3.

24. Bährämovä, *Taralip yatkan tatar ile*, 163–66; Bährämovä, *Aliplar ilendä* (Kazan, 2003), 4.

allies in their fight against Christian invaders. In other words, the Maris' fate was subordinated to the Tatars, who had the primary claim to the land.²⁵

Most important, giants not only fashioned the topography of the Saba and Arsk regions, but also created new hills as they hit the ground with their bast shoes in Agryz, Bolghar, and Biliarsk in southern Tatarstan. After they molded the landscape of Orenburg, Ufa, Cheliabinsk, Perm', and Sverdlovsk in the Ural region, their mountains reclined in prayer toward Mecca and marked out the territory of Idel-Ural. Due to Soviet machinations, Orenburg, Cheliabinsk, Perm', and Sverdlovsk were still located in Russia, and Ufa in Bashkortostan. Russian and Tatar academics mistakenly claimed that Tatars migrated to Orenburg either at the time of Ivan the Terrible or in the eighteenth century when in fact, originally, the lands belonged to the giants, Adam's offspring, and to the Tatars born from Japheth, Noah's son.²⁶

For B y r mova, neither the Russians who pretended that the land was empty when they arrived, nor the Bashkirs who sought to assimilate the Tatars, had any claims to the land. Only the Tatars, whose name meant "mountainmen" (*tau irl re*), had settled in the Urals at the time of the Prophet Noah. Even the Russian historian Nikolai Karamzin called the Urals the land of the Tatars. Moreover, the eighteenth-century Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus echoed local stories that Noah's ark landed in the Urals and that his family found refuge there after the flood. The cradle of human civilization was not Ararat in Armenia, but a mountain in the southern Urals. More accurate than the Bible, which specifically referred to Ararat, the Qur'an said only that the ark ended up on a mountain (*al-Judi*). Since the Qur'an and various hadiths mentioned that Noah and his descendants were giants, the giants of Bolghar-Tatar tales could only be their offspring. One more tangible proof was given by the Bashkir epic Ural-Bat r that B y r mova qualified as "tatarniki," meaning "belonging to the Tatars." According to her, its formulaic beginning, "when the four sides were surrounded by sea," referred specifically to Noah's flood. Thus, in B y r mova's eco-mythology, the famous knight Ural-Bat r joined the ranks of Noah's family in his colonization of Turkic lands.²⁷

Finally, B y r mova's territorial lineage would not be complete without the giant knights of Tatar Siberian epics, collected by the prerevolutionary Russian orientalist Vasilii Radlov. Siberia was the land that gave birth to the largest Turkic empires and the oldest Tatar epics. B y r mova, though, did not linger on the giants' exploits but simply listed their names, creating a new line of giant ancestors connected to Noah's descendants, while adding new giants from local lore that she had heard personally. Those new giants defended Tatar villages against Russian invaders. In short, the Bolghar land-shaping

25. B y r mova, *Taral p yatkan tatar ile*, 208–10.

26. B y r mova, *Taral p yatkan tatar ile*, 8, 165–66. About the Kazan Tatar colonization of the south Urals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Danielle Ross, *Tatar Empire: Kazan's Muslims and the Making of Imperial Russia* (Bloomington, 2020).

27. F u ziy  B y r mova, *Achilmagan tatar tarikh : F nni-populiar yazmalar* (Kazan, 2011), 101–7, 142; Fauziia Bairamova, *Neraskrytaia istoriia tatar* (Kazan, 2013), 54–56; B y r mova, *Alt n urdam—alt n jirem* (Kazan, 2006), 222; B y r mova, *Turan ile* (Kazan, 2008), 146–47; B y r mova, "Nukh p ygamb r k ym se," 135–36, 140–41, 176–77, 187–89, 192–93, 205.

giants and the giant-sized heroes of Bashkortostan and Siberia were now tied to Noah and Japheth, who first landed in the Urals, in an imaginal Tatar khanate that stretched from Kazan to Siberia. Such a claim was no different from the Renaissance friar Annius, who proposed that Noah's family colonized Europe and that their royal descendants had legitimate authority over the land.²⁸

In Bähräмова's primordial genealogy and cartography, the Russians were absent except as future invaders or forceful Christianizers. Her approach sharply differed from other Muslim authors, both medieval and modern. Although the fifteenth-century Persian historian, Mirkhond, traced Russians back to Noah's son Japheth, and Ahmat Bahjat, a popular Egyptian Sufi author translated into Russian, insisted on the common ancestry of humankind and the universality of God's message, Bähräмова did not count Russians as Noah's descendants. Russian state textbooks on Islam also emphasize the inclusiveness of a Muslim tradition that recognized the validity of Jewish and Christian revelations. By contrast, Bähräмова insisted on the special place of the Tatar Turks in the divine economy.²⁹

Bähräмова's Giant Gigantology as a Response to Tatar New Age

Bähräмова developed her cartography amid growing interest in esoteric knowledge. While admiring the sites of Arkaim in the Cheliabinsk region, and the standing *menhirs* (megaliths) of Akhunovo in Bashkortostan, she was shocked to see that not only ethno-nationalist Russians and Bashkirs claimed both places as their ancestral homes but that New-Age practitioners—neo-pagans, ESP, and ufologists—also chose these places to practice their magic. For her, Tatar giants, not Indo-Aryans, raised the menhirs of Akhunovo. More appalling, Muslim Tatars and Bashkirs continued engaging in “pagan” practices of making vows, hanging prayer flags, or circumambulating rocks.³⁰

Bähräмова's attack on magic, esotericism, and neopaganism was not gratuitous. In the 1990s, Tatar neo-paganism and Tatar esotericism complicated the return of Tatars to their so-called original faith. One of the representatives of the Tatar neopagan movement, Däübash, invited his blood brothers—be they Christian or Muslim—to revert to the worship of their common Turkic Sky-God or Tengri. His 1997 pan-Turanian myth of origins was deeply influenced by the Kemalist History Thesis that tied all aspects of world history to the Turks, and by Lev Gumilev's critical assessment of the Golden Horde's

28. Bähräмова, *Achilmagan tatar tarikhü*, 333–34; Bähräмова, *Turan ile*, 146–47.

29. Akhmad Bakhdzhat, *Proroki Allakha: Perevod* (Ufa, 2002), 15–21; Fäüziyä Bähräмова, “Nukh päygambär köymäse,” 140; D. I. Latyshina and M. F. Murtazin, *Osnovy religioznykh kul'tur i svetskoi etiki: Osnovy Islamskoi kul'tury (4–5 klass)* (Moscow, 2010), 31; Fäüziyä Bähräмова, *Millätämä khezmat ittem* (Kazan, 2013), 354.

30. In 2002 and 2006, Bähräмова visited Arkaim, a megalithic city in the southern Urals in Russia excavated in the 1980s, and in 2006, she visited the standing menhirs of Akhunovo in Bashkortostan, which came to the attention of archaeologists in 1996. Both sites have excited many speculations. See V. Shnirel'man, “Strasti po Arkaimu: Ariiskaia ideia i natsionalizm,” in *Iazyk i etnicheskii konflikt*, eds. M. B. Olcott and Il'ia Semenov (Moscow, 2001), 58–85; and Vadim Rossman, “In Search of the Fourth Rome: Visions of a New Russian Capital City,” *Slavic Review* 72, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 510.

conversion to Islam. For the Russian esoteric historian, Khan Uzbek's decision to adopt Islam as a state religion was responsible for the disruption of religious harmony in the steppe.³¹ Faithful to the Kemalist view of Turkic proto-history, Däübash's children's tale portrayed giants as common Turkic ancestors for the peoples of Japan, the Americas, and Eurasia. The earth, it said, was first peopled by giants who descended from Tengri's sons, and not from Adam or Noah, an assumption that Bährämovä attacked vigorously in her diaries and children's literature. Däübash's giants came originally from the Altai region (not from the Urals) and spread to the Eurasian steppe, the Western Hemisphere, and Japan. As for the Bolghar giants, they adopted Islam from a cunning nation, the Arabs, and despite efforts of their Mongol brothers to bring them back to Tengrism, the Bolghars continued serving the interests of Islam even if it made them weaker. Worse, they prayed in a foreign language and almost forgot their native tongue, and because they had forfeited their original faith, they could not repel new invaders.³²

The solution for Däübash was religious pluralism. In *Tatar dogalari* (Tatar Prayers), which addressed a much larger audience, Däübash favored Asian religious pluralism as a model for Turks: Tatars could be Muslim, Christian, and Tengrist as the Japanese could be Shinto, Buddhist, and Confucian.³³ This, of course, did not meet Bährämovä's approval, who could already be seen wearing a Muslim scarf in the earliest years of perestroika. In her fantasy novel, *Nukh päygambär köymäse* (The Prophet Noah's Ark), she "Qur'anized" Ural-Batir, the famous giant-hero of the Bashkir epic of the same name that Bashkir and Tatar neopagans view as one of their celestial Turkic ancestors. In Bährämovä's genealogical reconstruction, Ural-Batir became a descendant of Noah through Alip, while the printed versions of the epic simply stated that his parents had lived so long that they could not even remember their origins.³⁴

The popular esotericist Ernst Muldashev (b. 1948), a surgeon-ophthalmologist from Ufa, shared Bährämovä's fascination for the Bolghar giants but instead of linking them to Islam, he advanced an alternative genealogy for their origins. An admirer of Madame Blavatsky and Nicholas Roerich, Muldashev adopted the theosophist conception of premodern history by tracing the Bolghar and Turkic giants to the Lemurians and Atlanteans, two mythical peoples whose legends constituted the basis for all world mythologies, and whose continents had sunk under the sea because of their abuse of technology. These giants still lived in the bottomless lakes of the Bashkir

31. Clive Foss, "Kemal Atatürk: Giving a New Nation a New History," *Middle Eastern Studies* 50, no. 5 (September 2014): 826–47; Mark Bassin, *The Gumilev Mystique: Biopolitics, Eurasianism, and the Construction of Community in Modern Russia* (Ithaca, 2016), 99.

32. Firdüs Fätkhelislam (b. 1962) took the pseudonym of Däübash. Firdüs Fätkhelislam, *Koyash khalki yazmishi* (Kazan, 1997), 3–20.

33. Firdüs Däübash, *Tatar dogalari* (Kazan, 2007), 6–7, 9.

34. Bährämovä, "Nukh päygambär köymäse," 177, 244–45; Bährämovä, *Achilmagan tatar tarikhä*, 105; *Ural-Batyr: Bashkirkii narodnyi epos*, trans. A. Kh. Khakimov (Ufa, 2017), 138; *Ural-Batyr: Bashkirkii narodnyi epos v prozaicheskompereplozhenii Aidara Khusainova* (Ufa, 2004), 5; Marina Nikolaeva, "Tiurkskoe neoiazychestvo v Uralo-Povolzh'e: Uchenie i praktika," *Agenstvo Politicheskikh novostei*, at www.apn.ru/publications/article32104.htm (accessed February 12, 2020).

landscape or inside its hills as guardians of occult knowledge. Immersed in a deep state of meditation, they were ready to assist humanity in its evolutionary search for spiritual perfection. For Muldashev, the menhirs of Akhunovo were antennas through which the giants stayed informed about humanity's progress. His esoteric cartography tied Bashkortostan and Tatarstan to Easter Island, known for its impressive statues that only giants could have built. Muldashev did not subscribe to any single religion or ritual, and advocated perennialism, that is the belief that all religions emerged from a common metaphysical truth. Who cared if one ate pork or not, we were all part of the same human family!³⁵

No matter how critical B yr mova was of neopaganism and theosophist perennialism, she also subscribed to the neopagan revalorization of the steppe empires. Although she rejected their philosophy, B yr mova could also point to the evidence for the existence of giants offered by New-Age writers to bolster her own claims that Muslim prophets of a gigantic size had been a historical reality: they left traces in South America, Easter Island, Stonehenge, and in the kurgans of Idel-Ural, which explained the many commonalities between the civilizations of Sumeria, the Mayas, and the Tatars. Further, the novelist often alluded to the myth of Atlantis to warn Tatars of their impending doom if they failed to return to Islam. B yr mova's main task was to reestablish the Qur'anic genealogy of the Turkic giants of Eurasia, balancing her rigorist Salafi leanings with those aspects of popular piety that inspired her literary work.³⁶

Soviet Roots of the 1990s–2010s Giant Mania

The 1990s–2010s infatuation with giants and their meaning had deep Soviet roots. From the start of the revolution, the Bolsheviks sought to gain the support of ethnic minorities. Folklorists played an important role in consolidating national identities, and it was through folklore that Tatar writers came to express their religious belonging. Tatar folkloristics was not created from scratch; Kayum Nasiryri had published collections of tales in the nineteenth century, and the famous Soviet Tatar folklorist Gali R kchim was already actively involved in the compilation and publication of popular literature in Tatar journals before the revolution. By the 1930s, however, Soviet authorities, fearful of bourgeois nationalism, brutally repressed Tatar ethnographers such as Vakhidov, who collected the very *rivay t* that later inspired B yr mova.³⁷

35. Ernst Muldashev, *Zagadochnaia aura Rossii: Vpoiskakh natsional'noi idei* (Moscow, 2008), 82–84; Ernst Muldashev and Nikolai Ziat'kov, *Putevoditel' po zagadochnym mestam planet v labirintakh nepoznannogo* (Moscow, 2015), 18–30; Ernst Muldashev, *Where Do We Come From? The Sensational Findings of a Himalayan Expedition* (Durham, 2012), 33, 183–233, 345, 347–50, 386, 417, 486, 492.

36. B yr mova, "Kaharman tatarlar," in *Tufannan taralgan tatarlar*, 8–10, 130; B yr mova, *B khet achkichi* (Kazan, 2002), 159–60; B yr mova, *Taralip yatkan tatar ile*, 161; Defak Rakhmati, *Deti Atlantidy* (Kazan, 1999); B yr mova, *Aliplar ilend *, 70–71.

37. Frank J. Miller, *Folklore for Stalin: Russian Folklore and Pseudofolklore of the Stalin Era* (Armonk, NY, 1990), 6–11; Dana Prescott Howell, *The Development of Soviet Folkloristics* (New York, 1992), 192, 251, 303–4, 317–19, 324–25, 375–76; R. M rdanov and

After Stalin's death in 1953, the Tatar intelligentsia actively participated in the compilation and integration of folk material into its prose as expressions of its native moral values. This new literature was a form of eco-Islam that bore much resemblance to the works of Idris Bazorkin, a famous Ingush writer, and of the internationally known Kirghiz author Chinghiz Aitmatov in their use of pre-Islamic and Islamic mythology. Tatar and Russian village prose writers such as Valentin Rasputin also shared the same attraction to pre-Soviet national traditions. Older characters, lamenting the flooding of ancient cemeteries, the loss of funerary rites, and the destruction of houses of worship, symbolized the past, its continuities and ruptures.³⁸

While Soviet Tatar writers avoided direct quotations from the Qur'an and even occasionally portrayed those who still performed the five daily prayers as narrow-minded kulaks, they also expressed anxieties about their loss of cultural and religious identity by drawing on folkloric themes. The giants as primordial fashioners of the land came to the fore in the 1950s as optimistic symbols of the economic achievements of the oil and automobile industries. For example, in 1957, the writer Nurikhan Fättakh (1928–2004), born in a small Tatar village in Bashkortostan, incorporated legends about giant ancestors into his first children's novella, *Tegermändä* (In the Mill). Antediluvian giants had tilled the soil with golden plows, leaving behind abundant mineral wealth to be discovered by a Soviet Tatar geologist. Another writer, Garif Akhunov (1925–2000), who moved to Al'met'evsk in 1956 to learn more about the life of oil workers, referred indirectly to the hidden giants' treasure in two children's works devoted to the transformation of a small village into an oil mega-city. His books gave no inkling of the cultural and ecological damage wrought by the rapid, forced industrialization of Tatarstan. On the contrary, the oil transformed the village in a positive way: Tatars no longer had to leave their low-yield land to work in Baku, Ukraine, or Siberia. They could live in their homes and continue working outdoors, while contributing to the economic health of the whole Soviet Union, and even the world. The Soviet authorities even corrected the ecological damages of the previous regime: they planted new trees on the hills of the middle Volga and worked to preserve underground caverns.³⁹ By the 1970s, intense hydro-electrification,

I. Hadiev, eds., *Gali Rākhim: Tarikhi-dokumental', ädäbi häm biografik jiyintik* (Kazan, 2008), 432–42; Flora Äkhmätova, ed., *Tatar khalik ijati: Dastannar* (Kazan, 1984), 5–28.

38. Gomär Bāshirov, "Tilsimli dönyasında" (1964) in G. Bāshirov, ed., *Tormish yulında* (Kazan, 1986), 191–204; Rebecca Ruth Gould, "Enchanting Literary Modernity: Idris Bazorkin's Postcolonial Soviet Pastoral," *The Modern Language Review* 115, no. 2 (April 2020): 403–26; Rossen Djagalov, "Pamiat' vs. Memorial: Rasputin, Aitmatov and the Search for Soviet Memory," *Studies in Slavic Culture* 8 (2009): 27–42; Kathleen F. Parthé, *Russian Village Prose: The Radiant Past* (Princeton, 1992); Harry Walsh, "Christian-Pagan Syncretism in Russian 'Ruralist' Prose," *Religion & Literature* 27, no. 2 (Summer, 1995): 69–86; Joseph P. Mozur, *Doffing 'Mankurt's Cap': Chinghiz Aitmatov's 'The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years' and the Turkic National Heritage*, The Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies, no. 605 (Pittsburg, 1987): 4–5, 13–15, 24–25.

39. Nurikhan Fättakh, "Tegermändä" in *Saylanma üsärklär*, 5 vols. (Kazan, 2002), 4: 358–78; Nurikhan Fattakh, *Iazyk bogov i faraonov* (Kazan, 1999), 153–54; "Na mel' nitse" in Nurikhan Fattakh, *Nash mladshii brat* (Moscow, 1963), 15–43; biography of Garif Akhunov in *Pisateli Sovetskogo Tatarstana* (Kazan, 1970), 47–49; Garif Akhunov, *Kanatlar kaya*

oil drilling, and Tatars' migration to cities prompted writers to warn against the possible loss of Tatar identity and language. There the giants took a new meaning: they were no longer the caretakers of a hidden material treasure, but the forgotten ancestral guardians of the Tatar cultural heritage. The playwright Äkhsän Bayanov (b. 1927), a proud descendant of mirzas and mullahs, expressed this shift in his popular 1972 novella *Tau yağı poveste* (The Tale of the Mountainside), which blamed past generations for failing to inculcate national and spiritual values in their descendants. After returning to his village, Täbrik, a Russian-speaking Tatar soldier abandoned by his parents and raised in an orphanage reconnects with his roots through the discovery of his genealogy, which identified his giant ancestor Alip as the first being to till the land and fashion its topography.⁴⁰

Writing in the Brezhnev period—a time when Communist Party officials favored village prose writers concerned about the preservation of Russia's historical past—Bayanov used explicitly religious imagery in his call for cultural renewal.⁴¹ The village's mosque had lost its minaret and its well was polluted, but the village sacred spring, bathed in moonlight, preserved its life and purity. Corrupt mullahs could no longer be the source of Qur'anic knowledge and morality, but the village hydroscape, born from the giants' arrows or the tears of Muslim saints, could still miraculously renew people's faith and identity. For Täbrik, the spring represented an eternal rebirth that wiped away the sins of his people, in particular alcoholism. At another spring, near his ancestors' graves, Täbrik instinctively cleansed his face, arms, and head in the prescribed order of Muslim ablutions while his grandfather prayed to God that he would follow the moral code of his ancestors. Bayanov even went further, tying Tatar renewal to Sufism. The grandfather brought Täbrik pictures of Bolghar, the city where Tatars first converted to Islam, and drew his attention to the minaret and a mausoleum that Soviet scholars had mistaken for a judicial palace. Instead, the building was a *khanaka*, the lodge of Sufi dervishes and pilgrims, but unfortunately, young people viewed Bolghar ruins simply as a historic heritage and not as a sacred site. Thus, for Bayanov, Bolghar and the landscape created by ancestral giants served as mnemonic devices of Tatars' Sufi-inspired religiosity.⁴²

Bayanov was one of the first to question the modern mismanagement of the land in Tatarstan. He was followed by Gomär Bäshirov (1901–1999), a committed communist who had fought in the civil war and served as a judge during 1930s collectivization before becoming a journalist, folklorist, and novelist. In his 1977 best-seller *Jidegän chishmä* (The Big Dipper Spring), Bäshirov used the giants to warn against ecological degradation and the

iltä: Tugan jir turında povest' (Kazan, 1967), 5, 22–23, 31–33, 156–58, 263; Garif Akhunov, *Chelovek ishchet sokrovishche* (Moscow, 1969), 65–100.

40. Äkhsän Bayanov, *Tau yağı poveste: Povest' lar häm lirik parchalar* (Kazan, 1979); "Äkhsän Bayan," in *Ädiplärebez: Biobibliografik beleshmälek*, 2 vols. (Kazan, 2009), 1: 172.

41. Yitzhak M. Brudny made the argument that in his agrarian reforms, Brezhnev needed the village prose writers' public support to counteract the liberal-reformist wing of the intelligentsia, see his *Reinventing Russia: Russian Nationalism and the Soviet State, 1953–1991* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), 58–60.

42. Bayanov, *Tau yağı poveste*, 20, 58, 75–76, 79, 92–93, 95, 101, 107, 109–12.

possible loss of spiritual identity. The novel's main protagonists identified giant ancestors as the original settlers and shapers of the sacred meadow that the collective farm administration planned to turn into arable land and oil fields. For the villagers, both the meadow berries and the springs had healing properties, but despite their therapeutic benefits, the kolkhoz director was bent on destroying them for economic profit. At first view, Bāshirov's story implied that its heroes—journalists, Komsomol members, war veterans, and teachers—were purely concerned with ecology, but the author was also sensitive to the religious and emotional significance of ancestral meadows and springs. One character, who was beaten for trying to save the spring, had a vision of a paradisiacal garden on the edge of a threatening abyss, while the local authorities viewed the site as a locus of popular Sufi superstitions, where people prayed and made vows.⁴³

Both Bayanov and Bāshirov used toponymy and genealogy as a map for Turkic unification, preparing the way for Bāyrāmovā's cartography. In their Land of Giants, there was no separation between Christian and Muslim Tatars, or between Tatars and Bashkirs. Bayanov referred to a story in which nominally Christian villagers, who had repeatedly converted to Orthodoxy to gain tax exemptions, in the end killed their priest. In Bāshirov's romanticized autobiography, published in 1967, the Kriashens, who in his view had been forcibly baptized in the sixteenth century, constituted a community with distinct phonetic variations and a separate culture. Despite these differences, Bāshirov believed that unity between Tatars and Kriashens could be achieved. Bāshirov identified the old Kriashen Bikä (the most positive character in his memoir) with his village's sacred springs. For Bikä, every element in nature had a soul; she talked to stones and plants. But most important for the author, her dual faith united Kriashens and Tatars and made religion as an identity marker superfluous. For Bikä, who recited Muslim prayers but wore a cross on her chest, the Tatars' God and the Russians' God should reconcile. Who could tell which one was true, and why not serve them both? Tatars were not as lucky as their Kriashen neighbors; they only had one god to rely on. When a fistfight erupted between Muslims and a wealthy baptized Tatar who wished to separate himself from the village commune, Bikä reminded them that Muslims and Christians were all children of the Divine.⁴⁴

In *The Big Dipper Spring*, Bāshirov portrayed Tatars and Bashkirs as belonging to the same sacred geography. One positive character married a Bashkir girl whose village cared for the grave of a prerevolutionary Tatar colporteur

43. Gomār Bāshirov, *Jidegän chishmä*, 2 vols. (Kazan, 1977–78), 1: 37–40, 64, 67–84, 89–91, 97, 195, 229; 2: 180. An unpublished older plot of the novel confirms that Bāshirov had a mystical Sufi locus in mind. In that earlier draft, his characters prayed at the site of a grave that belonged to a saint named Bahaetdin, which coincidentally happened to be the name of the Central Asian “second founder” of the Naqshbandi Sufi order. See excerpt cited in Ilida Bāshirova, *Jidegän chishmä mongī* (Kazan, 1995), 28.

44. In 1967, Bāshirov had already appropriated the giants' motif in his childhood recollection of Ianasal, a Christian Tatar village that had petitioned for the state's recognition of its Islamic identity in the nineteenth century. There he recalled the village elders' tales that mentioned the little farmers who would outlive the giants. Gomār Bāshirov, *Tugan yagim—yäshel bishek* (Kazan, 2014), 85–87, 232–41.

who had come originally from the boy's village; the relationship between the two villages highlighted the common history that Tatars and Bashkirs shared. An early draft of the novel shows that originally Bāshirov intended to locate his book in an oil region, but the Civil War veteran moved his plot to the Ik River valley from where Bashkir lands could be seen from a bird's eye perspective. Very subtly, Bāshirov's eco-mythology united Kriashens, Bashkirs, and Tatars in one sacred geography, originally molded by their ancestral colossi, that challenged the Soviets' support for a separate Bashkir autonomous republic.⁴⁵

As in Bayanov's novella, Bāshirov's land was also implicitly tied to Turkic Sufi heritage. This link between land and Sufism became even more explicit at the beginning of the 1980s when the playwright Ildar Yuzeev wrote a play celebrating the Tatar national poet Gabdulla Tukay (1886–1913), whom he portrayed as a new Muhammad, sent to the Tatars to renew their faith. Like the Prophet, Tukay was an orphan, and his poems could rival the Qur'an in melody. Most important for our subject, Yuzeev's *Land of Giants* coincided with the borders of the Bolghar kingdom, and Tatars, descendants of the glorious Bolghar Alip, had courageously defended their territory against their Mongol invaders. Later, on the same land, Tatars had to suffer the onslaught of Russian missionaries, but Kriashens did not forget Islam, the religion of their ancestors, and their language. The chorus emphatically called Tatars to renew their faith and return to their Sufi saints and poets, Kol Gali and Sheykh Mökhämmäd-Yar, while embracing progress, art, music, and gender equality. Mullahs and priests were all parasites, but if the descendants of Alip embraced science and the Qur'an, Tatars could produce their own Shakespeare, Tolstoi, and Pushkin. While Yuzeev criticized the rote performance of rituals as hypocritical, he strongly believed that Tukay's Islam could be the source of cultural renewal for his people. The play, despite taking place before the revolution, suggested that religion remained a central component of Tatars' identity, and that modernity and Islam properly understood were not mutually exclusive. In this daring configuration, the giants served as a mnemonic device to help Tatars remember their spiritual roots and to cherish their native language, which, in Kazan, had suffered drawbacks.⁴⁶

There was no doubt that Yuzeev and his predecessors prepared the way for Bāyrāmova's mobilization of religious symbols in her critique of the Soviet experiment. Though less subtle than these authors, Bāyrāmova portrayed Kriashens, who by then had openly reasserted their identity, as manipulators of dark magic forces and Bashkirs as a frivolous people, but she also broadened these authors' cartography and historiography to the Golden Horde. Her eco-nationalism also contrasted with the eco-internationalism of Tatarstan and Central Asia in the early years of perestroika, which did not carry strong anti-colonial, nationalist overtones. And, most important, in her understanding of Islam, she questioned her predecessors' decoupling of belief and religious practice as well as their identification of Islam with Sufism and its popular manifestation of piety. As a novelist, however, Bāyrāmova remained

45. Bāshirov, *Jidegän chishmä*, 1: 91, 2:230–31; Bāshirova, *Jidegän chishmä mongi*, 32.

46. Ildar Yuzeev, "Ochti dönya chitlegennän . . .," *Kazan Utları* no. 10 (October 1981): 62–97.

fastened to her colleagues' conception of giant-ecological enchantment, and she relied on it to "re-Islamize" her own people.⁴⁷

Giants as Embodiment and Guardians of Islamic Authority

Bäyrämova's diaries sounded very much like the diaries of the pre-revolutionary Eastern Orthodox missionaries who traveled across baptized Tatar villages in the Kazan province to measure their level of commitment to Christianity. The Tatar nationalist's concern, of course, was more about the level of Tatars' attachment to their ancestral faith. She, too, looked at people's dress, house interior, mosque attendance, celebration of Islamic holidays, and daily performance of prayer. She also inquired about whether people gave their children Islamic or international names, whether they knew their family *shäjärä* (genealogy) and *tamga* (clan symbol), or whether they cared for the preservation of their sacred and historical landscape. Most of all, in her travelogues and speeches, she vehemently condemned any manifestation of popular piety that Soviet Tatar writers associated with Tatar culture and morality: making vows, praying at shrines, circumambulating sacred rocks, and organizing repasts. However, her fictional protagonists often engaged in these very religious practices that she condemned in her polemical work. Her characters prayed at the bottom of sacred hills and encountered giant-sized "prophets" whom she called *äüliya*, meaning "friends of God," a title reserved for Sufi saints.⁴⁸

While Tatar novelists of the 1970s–80s viewed the village either as a center of authentic spiritual values or a moral paradise threatened by reckless monoculture and industrialization, Bäyrämova's village was in deep spiritual crisis: it had become the locus of religious apostasy and moral depravity. Sacred meadows (*bolin*) were no longer sites of joyous festivals as in Bäshtirov's childhood memoir, but of wild drinking parties, fueled by local beet vodka.⁴⁹ Urban youth polluted the village with narcotics and Russian-laced slang. Moral degeneration had contributed to the Kyshtym nuclear disaster in the 1950s, when many Tatars lost their lives and health to radiation sickness. Worse, infatuated with foreign customs, Tatars allowed their dead to be buried together with Russians in common cemeteries. Crosses, statues, and bottles of vodka defiled the land of their giant-prophets, a sign of the end of times.⁵⁰

47. Bäyrämova, *Taralıp yatkan tatar ile*, 15, 52, 314–15; Fäüziyä Bäyrämova, "Songy namaz" in *Kirik sirt: Romannar* (Kazan, 2005), 577–78, 616, 654–56; Jane I. Dawson, *Eco-nationalism: Anti-Nuclear Activism and National Identity in Russia, Lithuania, and Ukraine* (Durham, 1996), 29–30, 48, 121–41, 166; Edward A. D. Schatz, "Notes on the 'Dog that didn't Bark': Eco-internationalism in Late Soviet Kazakstan," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22, no. 1 (January 1999): 136–61.

48. Fäüziyä Bäyrämova, "Millät, din häm khakimiyat!" in *Däverläär kücheshendä. Publitsistik yazmalar häm shigir'lar* (Älmät, 1998), 122; Bäyrämova, *Bäkhät achkichi*, 159; Bäyrämova, *Taralıp yatkan tatar ile*, 54–56, 335, 338–39; Bäyrämova, *Hajj köndälege* (Challı, 1999), 67, 71; Bäyrämova, *Aliplar ilendä*, 125.

49. Fäüziyä Bäyrämova, "Bolın," (1982) in *Khäzerge tatar prozası: Berenche jiyintik* (Kazan, 2003), 170–238; Bäyrämova, *Aliplar ilendä*, 41, 120.

50. Fäüziyä Bäyrämova, "Karabolak," in *Kirik sirt: Romannar*, 300, 328, 418–19; Bäyrämova, "Nukh päygambär köymäse," 284, 292–94

As Bährämovä denounced Tatars' moral depravity, she also offered a vision of possible redemption through a return to the giants' faith, Islam. In *Aliplär ilendä* (The Land of Giants, 2002), the teenaged hero Kamil recalls the stories of giants that his father used to tell before he started drinking. One of his favorites was the story of the Prophet Adam's son, Timershäyekh, a giant who climbed a minaret, strung his bow, and shot an arrow that struck a hill and opened a miraculous spring. The hill, as instructed by the giant himself, became his burial place. Tragically, the meadow at the bottom of the hill where the giants once worshiped now produced beets for the alcohol industry. When Kamil asked why the giants disappeared, his father, a secular historian, was unable to provide the answer. However, his devout grandmother, drawing upon the Qur'an and hadiths, explained that most of the giants perished in the worldwide flood for their sins. Practicing Muslims would one day regain the size of Adam, the very first giant who measured thirty meters, as they entered paradise.⁵¹

Size was a sign of prophecy. In *The Prophet Noah's Ark* (2004), Ätil, the main teenage character, lost in the irradiated zone of Yamantau where Noah's ark landed, experienced prophetic dreams about the impending doom of his people, and became a giant after his death. As he searched for the living water that could give his people eternal life, Ätil emulated his giant-hero Ural-Batir who, instead of drinking the water, selflessly bestowed immortality on nature. Likewise, in *Karabolak* (2005), Bahadur, an exemplary pious teenager who suffered from acromegaly because of radiation, was compared to a modern Alpamsha. Like his ancestor, Bahadur was a warrior, fighting for the spiritual survival of his people and diligently mastering religious and secular sciences to find a cure for his family. Displaying powerful prophetic gifts, infant Bahadur spoke in his cradle as the Prophet Jesus did in the Qur'an, and as death neared, the young boy experienced the same daydreams and visions of paradise and hell as Kamil and Ätil. All three teenagers were conduits of Islamic authority and led their family to salvation.⁵²

In all three novels, redemption was collective, not simply personal, and ecological repair was tied to Tatars' collective return to the routinization of their faith. While lying in the sacred meadow, which had just been turned into a soulless beet farmland, Kamil in *The Land of Giants* had an extraordinary vision: the sacred mount split into two and the giants came out. Luminous in their white clothes, they lined up for the communal prayer. A giant child approached Kamil and took him into his palm, warning him that if his people—his family, village, and nation—did not follow sharia, Allah would order their extinction as He had for the giants of 'Ad. Kamil joined the giants' communal prayer, repeating each movement. Later, as his girlfriend, Kamilä, a drug addict, lay at the hospital between life and death, the giants emerged from her heart and healed her wounds. Both Kamil and Kamilä, whose names meant "the perfect ones" in Arabic, ended up bringing their whole family and

51. Bährämovä, *Aliplär ilendä*, 3–9, 24–25, 33–35; Bährämovä, *Taralip yatkan tatar ile*, 160–65, 196.

52. Bährämovä, "Nukh päygambär köymäse," 328–30; Bährämovä, "Karabolak," 405–21.

the village (except for those who had drilled and scarred the landscape) to their original faith.⁵³

Surprisingly, despite B yr mova's earlier critiques of popular expressions of Islam in her diaries, there was no condemnation of such religiosity in *The Land of Giants*. However, *The Prophet Noah's Ark* cautioned against praying and making vows at Arkaim. The only place where one could circumambulate and make vows was the Kaaba in Mecca; instead of praying at those sacred hills and springs, people should just perform the required namaz five times a day.⁵⁴ In *Karabolak*, B yr mova lamented that Alip Khan, a giant ancestor buried in a Scythian kurgan, was still an object of local supplication. Worse, the villagers continued turning to the *yakhshilar* or saints' spirits for help and practiced forms of folk medicine and exorcism that imams and science did not approve of.⁵⁵

But B yr mova's positive female characters challenged the author's definition of Islamic orthopraxy. Following village tradition, G ljihan, the protagonist of *Karabolak*, organized an all-funerary feast for the irradiated dead. (B yr mova condemned such feasts in her non-fictional work.) In an especially touching passage, G ljihan took the lead as her mother did when she was alive, reciting prayers and chanting the same religious poetry (*m n j t*) her mother had copied down in her notebook. B yr mova, this time, did not remind her readers of the un-Islamic character of holding wakes. On the contrary, she pointed out that the recitation of Tatar *m n j t* tied all previous generations together. It was as if these women, who had lost so many loved ones to radiation, wove back together the many shreds of their native village's history and geography.⁵⁶

B yr mova is clearly conflicted about Tatars' indigenous forms of piety. As a writer, she does find inspiration in them but as a believer, schooled by the first Saudi and Egyptian missionaries who came to Tatarstan, B yr mova believes that Tatars need to return to the pristine Islam of Saudi Arabia. G ljihan's daughter, who was born deaf and mute because of the nuclear disaster, married a young Arab imam from Saudi Arabia, whose ancestor was the Prophet Muhammad. Because the land of Karabolak was still unsafe, the only escape was to perform *hijra* (migration) as Tatars did in previous times to escape russification. G ljihan's son accompanied his twin sister and married a Tatar (and Tatar-speaking) girl living in Saudi Arabia. Thus, G ljihan's family tree was renewed through a new infusion of the Prophet's blood.⁵⁷

One could say that B yr mova represents a localized form of Salafism, expressed in the Tatar language, that defies the usual assumption made by western political scientists that post-Soviet Salafism is Russian-speaking and foreign. But B yr mova's hermeneutics could also defy our current categorization of Islamic hermeneutics. As a novelist, B yr mova remains fastened to her literary predecessors' conception of ecological enchantment that was

53. B yr mova, *Aliplar ilend *, 42–49, 68, 70, 130–37.

54. B yr mova, "Nukh p ygamb r k ym se," 270–71.

55. B yr mova, "Karabolak," 210–14.

56. B yr mova, "Karabolak," 507–9.

57. B yr mova, "Karabolak," 511–15, 529–30.

more accommodating to popular manifestations of piety, and her language of reform is no different than pre-revolutionary Tatar modernists' rhetoric that she blames for the later russification and secularization of Tatar society. Her cartography of geological formations created by giants and her reconstruction of *shäjärä* as sources of authority and legitimacy were also reminiscent of prerevolutionary Sufi shrine catalogs.⁵⁸ But as she expressed ambivalence toward older forms of Sufi piety, her discourse, one of accommodation and one of reform, left room for multiple readings. The same type of ambiguity could be found in pre-modernist Tatar literature that reflected the religious diversity and latitudinarianism of the Volga-Urals, a frontier region in which ethnic and religious identity could shift from one generation to another.⁵⁹ Bährämovä herself expressed great admiration for the Sufi poet, Rumi, as she traveled to Konya.⁶⁰ As a result, public school teachers can use her work to foster either the desire to preserve sacred places as ecological heavens or, if such is their inclination, adopt a much more rigorous understanding of Islam, or simply mix both depending on context.

In early medieval Anglo-Saxon literature, giants were the deceivers. Descendants of Cain, they embodied the sins of humanity or represented the uncivilized "other," living in an inhospitable landscape. Early Christian writers conflated the Biblical giants with ancient Greek gods and goddesses, and Noah's flood cleansed the earth of their depravity, paving the way for humanity's salvation. Their slaughter by Brutus and Arthur would signal the triumph of a new collective identity in the British islands.⁶¹ To some extent, Tatar folkloric sources also referred to giants as monsters who originally refused to hear the Prophets' calls or as the uncivilized "other" who did not share the same economic activities or values of the Bolghar Turkic state. However, Soviet Tatar authors such as Bayanov and Bährämovä chose to emphasize giants as builders and guardians of their sacred geography, threatened by what they perceived as reckless industrialization. Their geomyths contested earlier Soviet critique of epics and fairy tales as archaic remnants of feudalism. They also subtly questioned Soviet cartography, at least from a Tatar perspective, while mourning the impending loss of ethical and religious values.

Bährämovä, whose literary activity predated perestroika, expanded this trend and infused it with her own understanding of Islam. Her gigantology was more reminiscent of the Renaissance friar Annius whose cosmology was primarily nationalistic, and Rabelais whose aim was to reform the church.⁶² Good and pious, Bährämovä's giants descended from a line of Qur'anic prophets, legitimizing her people's ownership of the land, but most important, they had repented from their sins, and they embodied a reformed Islam, alternatively traditionalist or modernist, depending on the discursive context.

58. Allen Frank, "Islamic Shrine Catalogues and Communal Geography in the Volga-Ural Region: 1788–1917," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 7, no. 2 (1996): 265–86.

59. Agnès Kefeli, *Becoming Muslim in Imperial Russia* (Ithaca, 2014), 77–86.

60. Bährämovä, *Turan ile*, 264, 298; Bährämovä, *Achilmagan tatar tarikhü*, 335.

61. Cohen, *Of Giants*, xviii, 17–20.

62. Stephens, *Giants in Those Days*, 107, 192.

On the one hand Bāyrāmova castigated Muslims, neopagans, and psychics who treated the giants' sacred mountains and archeological sites as places of worship and high energy. On the other, despite her critique of localized expressions of piety, she also drew inspiration from the same pre-modernist modes of communal identification—sacred toponomy, kinship, dreams, etymologies—and used metaphors reminiscent of Sufi poetry. But contrary to the contemporary Egyptian Sufi Bahjat, whose translations addressed a Russian-speaking audience, her Noachian genealogy was far from being inclusive. Aiming at solidifying ethnic boundaries between Russians, Tatars, and other Volga minorities, she created a more endogamous genealogy, and constructed a common heritage for all Tatars living inside and outside the republic of Tatarstan, which reflected her own party's political vision.

While for Susan Stewart the gigantic had strayed away from the magical and religious, for the Tatar activist, the gigantic and its landscape were still part of the magical and religious.⁶³ As a modernist Salafi, Bāyrāmova might have condemned local expressions of indigenous piety in her parenthetical statements, but her fiction anchored in the topography of the Volga and Urals still left the door open for them to thrive. What her giant cosmology reveals is that nature itself remains one of the central conduits of religious knowledge as it was lived through the Soviet period; it unites visitors with their living ancestors and prepares children to bond with their Islamic and national heritage. It can also potentially bring secular Tatars or non-practicing Muslims back to the faith if they know how to relate to the hills' occupants appropriately. Public schools in and outside the Republic of Tatarstan have already developed special curricula on ecology and nature preservation in which Bāyrāmova's prose stands prominently alongside Bayanov's and Bāshirov's. Pedagogical textbooks direct children's attention to the religious elements of Bāyrāmova's prose, and Bāyrāmova herself is an active teacher in Islamic summer camps and an enthusiastic disseminator of her own work, offering free copies of her books to public schools and Tatar clubs.⁶⁴

In short, Bāyrāmova represents an original form of Tatar-language Salafism, rooted in giant eco-mythology, which parallels and could even complement the current revival of Sufi sites in Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. After all, the supposed grave of the mythical pre-Islamic giant Ural-Batır—recently discovered by clairvoyants using extra-sensory perception—has become the center of a new Sufi pilgrimage in Central Bashkortostan, joining the gigantic

63. Stewart, *On Longing*, 84.

64. Alsu Shāmsutova, *Fäüziyä Bāyrāmova prozası* (Kazan, 2004), 2, 31–35, 48; Rezeda Sabirova and Kharis Zakirov, "Tatar ädäbiyatında tabigat häm shähkes," Shamardan High School (Saba region), at <http://edutatar.ru/blog/tatarreferat/43.html> (accessed June 5, 2017); A. D. Battalova and A. R. Motigullina, *Programma distsipliny "Sovremennaiä tatarskaia literatura"* (Kazan, 2017), 7–9; Zilä Sabitova, "Yäshüsmerlärgä ukırğa kingäsh itelgän tatarcha 35 äsär," *Yalkın*, at <http://yalkyn.ru/news/achysh/yash-smerl-rg-ukyr-ga-ki-sh-itelg-n-35-s-r> (accessed June 30, 2020); excerpt of *The Prophet Noah's Ark* reproduced by a school anthology, published by a major pedagogical publishing house, whose goal was to encourage children to read the whole book, *Khäzerge tatar ädäbiyatı* (Kazan, 2008), 3–6, 253–73.

tombs ascribed to prophets and Muslim warriors of Arabia, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia.⁶⁵

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65. Information graciously provided by Jesko Schmoller; Lili Di Puppo and Jesko Schmoller, "The Revival of Sacred Sites in the Urals: The Local and Beyond," *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* 13, no. 2 (December 2019): 143–45; gigantic tombs can be found in Arabia, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia, see Wheeler, *Mecca and Eden*, 99.