The here and now and the hereafter

Engaging with fragrant realities in Muslim-minority Russia

Jesko Schmoller

The *murids* (apprentices) of the Naqshbandi-Mujaddidi brotherhood in Ufa, the capital of the Republic of Bashkortostan, assemble twice a week in the mosque that also serves as their place of meeting and dialogue. They are one of the several Muslim communities whose quotidian religious routines I closely observed during fieldwork over a period of 5 years. In the anteroom to the prayer hall, we would sit in a circle facing the teacher, who is addressed by everyone with the honorary title *hazrat*. Over hours and hours, while the shadow of the trees outside the windows moves through the room, we discuss Muslim metaphysics and questions of everyday behaviour. At times, some of the *murids* suddenly leave to attend to their personal affairs or they disappear into the prayer hall to read messages on their mobile phones. They may even close their eyes to take a brief rest from the discussion. The *suhbat* (conversation) ceremony, which is the preferred contemplative technique of the brotherhood, can be exhausting. To help sustain their energy, food or drinks are shared. And almost always, a small flask is handed around, from which the *murids* apply fragrance to their temples or rub it into their facial hair.

Upon returning from my first *suhbat* ceremony in the summer of the year 2017, I had the impression that both I and my environment were radically transformed. That night, the rented flat in Ufa felt only conceptually the same place it had been 12 hours previously. For me, this sense of dissociation, where it seemed impossible to reconcile my newly gained outlook with the reality I had become accustomed to, was bound up with a lingering of the fragrance that had been distributed among the *murids*. And while I did not want to make the scent responsible for how I had begun to perceive the world around me, I felt that it played a vital part in altering my sense of perception.

This chapter is concerned with the role of *misk* or *attar* (fragrance) in Muslim communities in the Russian Federation and particularly in the Russian Urals. At religious festivities and exhibitions, one can almost always discover at least one booth selling *misk* and one sometimes sees groups of young men, who swap the small flasks and discuss the merits and differences of their fragrant content. For those unused to them, the scents may initially seem overpowering. My empirical material was collected and insights formed during and after anthropological fieldwork in Uralic Muslim communities since summer 2015. I initially conducted fieldwork in Tatar and Bashkir villages in the south of Perm Krai, followed by

studying Sufi Islam and sacred sites in Bashkortostan and Chelyabinsk Oblast since early 2017. My focus is thus on the middle and southern Urals, where Islam is likely to have more in common with the Muslim traditions of Siberian Tatars than the religious landscape in Kazan or Moscow, meaning that it considers a vernacular rather than a purely scriptural interpretation of the religion.

In this contribution, my focus is on the effects of *misk* on the user. I intend to shed light on how in Muslim religious contexts, fragrance is related to the Islamic ‘other world’ (*al-ghayb*). I argue that by reflecting about the afterlife, people belonging to the Muslim minority in Russia do not only engage in theological speculation, but they also make a statement about the present and their own situation. The scholar of Islam Christian Lange (2016, pp. 12–13), who has recently turned to the study of the senses in Islam, points out that eschatology does not primarily pertain to that which is beyond and far away but to those things that are almost here and matter right now. By taking a closer look at popular perceptions of the coming world, he suggests, we can learn much about the most immediate fears, hopes and desires of Muslim believers. Events from the history of Muslim populations in Russia lend credibility to this proposition. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, village communities whose ancestors had been forcibly converted from Islam to Orthodox Christianity or who saw an advantage in converting were much distressed by what they considered to be indications of the impending end: a cholera epidemic, bad harvests, but also the building of new churches and the adoption of Russian language for instruction in Quranic schools (Kefeli, 2014a, pp. 26–27). Soon, they figured, the redeemer of Islam, the Mahdi, would restore the true faith and liberate them from Christian repression. This expectation encouraged great numbers of them to renounce officially their affiliation with Orthodox Christianity and return to Islam. In the twenty-first century, I want to emphasise, Muslims in Russia do not need to conceal their religious convictions, as long as they do not belong to radical Islamic groups. But some might be concerned about a new Russian national culture disregarding Muslim minority culture and accelerating a process by which the memory of a Muslim presence in Russia fades into oblivion. Although the conditions are far from ideal, the scent of *misk* promises another reality that has not yet arrived but whose arrival is already underway and cannot be inhibited by human force. The Muslim religious outlook holds the capacity to defy secular explanatory frames and it thus seems just as appropriate to speak about a collision of worlds, rather than only about a submerged clash of cultures. Drawing upon my empirical material, I am going to illustrate how in certain moments, fragrance can open a door to the other world or allow the other world to manifest in people’s surroundings.

Negotiating belonging

It needs to be clarified that many of the religious ideas discussed below are rather characteristic for the kind of vernacular Islam that informs the peripheral regions of the Muslim world, which, however, is not to say that they have to be considered marginal (Ahmed, 2016). This is true not only for the notion of the beyond located

in close proximity to our sphere of existence, but also for that of some people and matter traversing the boundary between the two worlds. Other than reformist interpretations of the Muslim faith, the vernacular variant is difficult to reconcile with modern secular perceptions of human life and social organisation. For the moment, I can only suspect that it is precisely this incompatibility which enables the emergence of an alternative reality. As noted above, I myself experienced a sense of dissociation when one mode of being was contested by another one. In a post-Soviet Russia that undergoes a process of desecularisation, we can observe a Muslim re-enchantment of the environment. And quite possibly, this re-enchantment must also be understood as a reaction to efforts by nationalist-minded groups to claim the land for the majority Slavic and Russian Orthodox population.

But who has the right to claim Russia for themselves? Who can define what it means to be Russian? Which populations are 'at home' in Russia and which have guest-status and are regarded as not truly constituting one segment of the Russian nation? We thus arrive at the question of belonging (Puzon, this volume). Although there has been an influx of working migrants from Central Asia and Azerbaijan into Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Islam has been part of Russian culture for considerably longer. Official declarations are frequently made stating that Muslim culture is part of Russia's shared heritage. Despite this, however, a policy of adaptation – in which Muslims and other minorities are supposed to give up their cultural and religious distinctiveness and become part of the majority culture – prevails. In my perception, the Russian government's course of action has much in common with Soviet nationality politics, where a 'folklorisation' of ethnic minority culture took place. At celebrations, members of ethnic minority groups were encouraged to perform their music and dances in traditional costumes, but rarely was this seen as anything more than decorative. While superficially promoting some aspects of ethnic minority culture – but never religion and other aspects that did not conform to Soviet socialist ideology – the ultimate aim remained to turn 'backward' people into Soviet citizens. In present-day Russia, references to a shared culture similarly appear to be mostly diplomatic in nature. The unspoken expectation seems to be that in the long run, Muslims will adapt to a hegemonic culture, defined in Russian terms. Conservative fractions furthermore undertake efforts to minimise if not erase a Muslim presence from the country's heritage.¹

At the same time, one can observe attempts by the Muslim minorities to manifest their own reality, as part of their lived Muslim culture. Fragrance is one of the means employed for that purpose. Accordingly, I ask what role fragrance plays for Muslims in Russia in facilitating the coming of a new world? And by looking at specific practices, which conceptions of the other world can be deduced from them? It must be stated that further objects and practices than the ones described below are involved: blessed sweets, recorded sermons and photographs of the *sheikh* (Sufi master) all play a role, for instance, in a local Muslim pilgrimage that turned a peripheral area into a place of central religious significance for the pilgrims.² Those items also appeal to the senses – taste, hearing and sight – of the people who use them. *Misk* seems appropriate both for its close association with the other world and for the evocative power of smell. In circumstances where some members

of the Russian elite would prefer to purge Russia's heritage of its Muslim components, *misk* assists Muslims in bringing about an entirely different state of being of and for themselves.

Although I like to think of Uralic Muslim practices also in terms of a response to official Russian policies, it would be misleading to characterise this as identity politics. Rather than either explicit resistance or overt attempts to reintroduce their culture in public space, the majority of practising Muslims whom I encountered are simply doing their best to reconcile their professional and family lives with the religious duties. Even so, these practices can be seen as a form of politics, especially since they have an effect on people's perception and transform the space they live in.³

Before attending to Muslim religious practice and the theological conceptions they indicate, I will in the following first describe and analyse attempts to render Muslim culture in Russia invisible. Partly in response to this, some Uralic Muslims are engaged in manifesting an alternative reality, evoked through concrete religious practices.⁴ These practices provide us with a better idea of their interpretation of this world and the next. Fragrance is commonly associated with the coming world and it assures Muslim believers in the specific context outlined in this chapter of the inevitable end of the current social order.

Concealing Muslim presence

Large Muslim populations in Russia and Eastern Europe more generally are not recent arrivals, but have long been very much at home in the regions they inhabit. It was the Russian Empire that – beginning in the sixteenth century – gradually expanded into other areas to swallow the Tatar khanates of the Volga, the Urals and Siberia and later the Muslim polities in the North Caucasus (Grant, 2009; Kappeler, 2001; Kivelson & Suny, 2017). Before the arrival of Russian settlers, the Urals – geographically located where the European and the Asian continents meet – were for many centuries only home to various Turkic and Finno-Ugric groups. Nowadays, Muslim Tatars and Bashkirs constitute ethnic and religious minorities to be found predominantly in the southern parts of the Urals, closer to the border with neighbouring Kazakhstan.

Despite claims of liberation and emancipation, one can argue that the Soviet Union continued the colonial enterprise of its predecessor, causing much harm to ethnic minority culture and individuals unwilling to renounce their beliefs (Gradska, 2019; Igmen, 2012; Kamp, 2006; Luehrmann, 2011; Northrop, 2003; Stronski, 2010). Since the end of the Soviet Union with its atheist ideology, we can observe a return of religion to Russia. Unfortunately, this does not necessarily mean that Muslims are able to practice their faith free of mistrust and rejection. For about two decades, a new Russian national identity is taking shape that stresses Slavic civilisation, Orthodox Christianity and an imperialist outlook. The spectacular rise in power of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is at least partly responsible for a tendency in wider society to erase the presence and heritage of Muslims in Russia from people's perception. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the political elites newly positioned Russia both in terms of political

ideology and in terms of geographical space and its relations to the rest of the world. Eurasianism – a school of thought typically promoting the building of a society of ethnic Russians adhering to Orthodox Christian religious principles and considered to be an imperialist ideology – became highly influential in the sphere of politics (Sibgatullina & Kemper, 2019, pp. 97–100).⁵ As the designation Eurasianism already suggests, no simple answers to the question of belonging are provided. Instead, what the designation captures is Russia's position between East and West, between Asia and Europe (Kaminskij & Friess, 2019, pp. 9–10). Unlike most other conservative groups in Europe, proponents of Eurasianism do not embrace a European identity to distance themselves from cultures considered to be Asian or Muslim. The Russian ultraconservative thinker and political analyst Aleksandr Dugin, who successfully turned Eurasianism into a movement, even referred to a heritage shared by Europe and Asia (Sibgatullina & Kemper, 2019, pp. 102–105). Although in the popular imagination, the Mongol rule of the late medieval period in Russia is responsible for the settlement of Muslim tribes and thus the enduring presence of Islam in the country, Dugin believes that it had a formative influence on the Russian state as a bulwark against Western encroachment. With the inheritance of this divine mission, Islam, for Dugin, seems to have exhausted its historical function and may now be dissolved to enable the rise of a united Orthodox Christian nation. Of course, Dugin's Eurasianist ideas are not the only valid ones and different Muslim leaders seek to accommodate to the ideological demands of the political system. They also do so, as they are aware of the Muslim population's minority status in Russia.

In spite of the indigenous provenance of many Muslim groups in Russia, the willingness to grant Muslims a proportionate degree of representation – both in historical accounts and in the built environment – is diminished by the problematic image of Islam in wider society. The ongoing conflict in the North Caucasus has been partly responsible for conventional associations of Islam with threat, destruction and chaos. So far, the efforts of the state and influential institutions to remake Russia into a glorious empire upholding the three-barred cross of the Russian Orthodox Church while reducing the Muslim presence have met with little resistance.

Two examples must suffice to indicate how Muslim and other ethnic minorities are made to disappear from the Russian perception of past and present. A new large-scale educational project called *Rossiia – Moya Istoriia* (Russia: My History) displays, in the format of an exhibition, an Orthodox Christian reading of Russian history.⁶ Developed by a team of people from within or close to the ROC and financially supported by the Russian state, the original exhibition in Moscow has been exported to twenty further cities across the country. The curators portray Russia as an empire, and visitors learn at the entrance to each room about the country's boundaries and size of population under each tsar. But nowhere do they mention the prior existence of non-Russian polities and societies or the colonial nature of the empire's expansion. Instead, visitors are presented with a picture of a Russian state existing in a cultural vacuum and surrounded by empty territories only waiting to be incorporated. Visitors unacquainted with Russia's colonial

history might gain the impression that any ethnic or religious minorities are not worth being considered and thus naturally inferior to Slavic and Russian Orthodox culture.

The second example concerns the confinement of Muslim presence in contemporary urban space. On the major Islamic holidays, *uraza bayram* (Eid al-Fitr) and *kurban bayram* (Eid al-Adha), millions of Muslims gather in the streets of Moscow to conduct the obligatory prayer, regularly causing a collapse of traffic in the Russian capital. As only four official mosques exist, many Muslims are forced to pray under the open sky even in conditions of rain or snow. The overall population of Moscow is estimated to be approximately 12.5 million, of which at least two million are Muslim (Lozinskaya, 2019). We must assume that the authorities are concerned by this ratio and try to prevent a more concrete architectural presence of Islam, thus denying Muslims the right to be seen, except on those main holidays.⁷ At the same time, the ROC is actively involved in the construction of new churches in the capital and all over the country. While there were about 50 churches and chapels in Moscow shortly before the end of the Soviet Union, this number had increased to 1,154 by 2017 (Gorevoy, 2019). Because the majority of churches can be found in the city centre, the administration implemented a programme for the construction of churches in 2010, which helps to expand the reach of the ROC to the suburbs. One church is to be built for each 20,000 inhabitants and no one should have to walk more than one kilometre to attend the service. In Moscow and beyond, Russia is being materially transformed in an Orthodox Christian image. Although the ROC depends upon donations to finance its construction campaigns, the state most likely assists the church by encouraging state corporations to donate money for this purpose (gazeta.ru, 2019).

Manifesting a lived Muslim culture

An excellent place to think about the once rich history of Muslim life in Russia would be the town of Troitsk. Located right next to the border with Kazakhstan, Troitsk used to be a significant centre of trade and a node on the famous Silk Road, whose multiple routes stretched from China to Turkey. With several Quranic schools, it also contributed to the Muslim mobility in the region, eventually disrupted by the Russian Revolution of 1917. The town's former glory is still tangible in the form of what used to be a fashion warehouse but now lies in ruins. Trade with Central Asia continues but is mainly reduced to the import of fruits and nuts from the south of Kazakhstan and the less visible flow of narcotics from Afghanistan. When walking on its empty streets, where the wind carries dust from the nearby Kazakh steppe, it feels like having arrived at the end of the world.

Nowadays, Muslim culture is once more flourishing in Troitsk. In the summer of the year 2019, I curiously examined the goods sold in a small store for religious products, which is attached to one of the main mosques of the town. To replenish their supply of *misk*, the store-owner regularly visits neighbouring Tatarstan. In the capital Kazan, he explains, one can choose from more than 1,500 different kinds of fragrance produced for Muslims, which demonstrates that *misk* constitutes one

segment of a massive market for Muslim consumer products in Russia. Some of the packaging displays Arabic writing, oriental ornaments and religious images, but other scents use variations of the name or logo of famous brands, such as Chanel, Paco Rabanne or Hugo Boss. Most of the small flasks contain three millilitres of fragrance and are sold by the storeowner for 120 roubles or less than two Euros. In Kazan, he was told that the *misk* he buys is almost exclusively made in the United Arab Emirates or in Turkey. Interestingly, one product line directly indicates the other world, confirming the association of fragrance with the invisible realm. Named ‘Al-Rayan’, it refers to one of the eight doors of Paradise.

Figure 4.1 Sample from a store for religious products in Troitsk, Russia, June 2019. Photograph by Jesko Schmoller.

Misk assists the manifestation of that which we cannot easily discern with our eyes. The other world is removed in space and time, but simultaneously it exists ‘everywhen’ (Lange, 2016, p. 11). By holding on to a rational outlook, firmly established in the Western hemisphere, we would be unable to grasp its ambiguous

relationship with the here and now. *Misk* reminds the believer of the confined space of life on this planet, the volatility of civilisation and the finitude of humanity. Secular powers provide a vision of a universe, where man is in control. This vision begins to dissolve when confronted with God's eternal domain. Similarly, people belonging to another faith community may be involved in erasing the traces of a Muslim past and heritage in this corner of the world, an attempt to which *misk* would be something of an antidote. *Misk* speaks of an alternative truth and a lifestyle that goes along with it. It newly makes visible a lived Muslim culture that had been neglected and seemingly forgotten. But all the while, this lived culture simply lay dormant. Once again, religious principles informed by the concept of a divide between this and the next world guide practising Muslims through space in search for knowledge and redemption. They arrive in Troitsk from all over Russia and even Kazakhstan to attend the newly opened Quranic school or pay their respects at the grave of a famous Sufi *sheikh*, where Islamic moral codes regulate personal interaction.

Fragrance is a distinctive kind of material object. When kept in liquid form in a container, it is both tangible and visible, but when applied to a surface fragrance evaporates and tends to become invisible to the eye. Is it because of this ambivalent quality that *misk* can grant us a glimpse of the otherwise invisible? By drawing upon insights from the academic tradition of material religion, I wish to better explain how fragrance may indicate the presence of the divine (Orsi, 2016, pp. 37–45); a presence, which in turn helps people to realise their exposure to an enchanted universe. Writing about charismatic Pentecostalism in West Africa, Birgit Meyer (2010) points out that mass-produced Jesus pictures may under certain circumstances accommodate demonic forces and then cease to be ordinary depictions of only symbolic value and instead become idols with the capacity to gain power over unsuspecting Christian believers. Marleen de Witte (2012) similarly writes about the real effects of the holy power in the lives of members of one Pentecostal community, who are rewarded for the adoption of a new lifestyle with material wealth, physical well-being and social status. Younes Saramifar (2018) describes the careful interaction of an Iranian Sufi master with his prayer beads, which he regards as being alive. A divine presence can also be detected in the empirical material from the Russian Urals presented in this chapter. Periodically, the other world interferes so forcefully with people's shared reality that it impacts them in their physical environment. This interference is frequently facilitated by *misk*.

***Misk* in Muslim history**

Before engaging with the empirical material from Russia, let us first see what people in the more central regions of the Muslim world historically associated with *misk* and how they put it to use. In the medieval Middle East, fragrance served a function not only in the social but also in the religious sphere (King, 2017, p. 325). Long before the arrival of Islam in the region, aromatics had already assumed the symbolic meaning of purity and holiness. And no aromatic was comparably influential in the history of Muslim civilisations as the animal product musk. Within Islam,

musk clearly acquired such a central role because of the Prophet's appreciation for it.⁸ According to one *hadith* (Prophetic tradition), Muhammad himself declared that he cared for nothing in this world except women and perfume (King, 2017, p. 343). The *hadith* literature contains a number of passages where Muhammad makes use of musk. It even becomes a component of Muslim ritual practice, as in the case of applying perfume when undergoing the full ablution. Musk was further employed for purposes of purification, including the reintegration of women into society after menstruation (King, 2017, pp. 350–351).

Interesting for the argument at hand is the association of fragrance with the other world, where Muslims enjoy conditions of complete purity and harmony, whereas one faces constant contamination and potential misery in the incomplete and impure conditions of this world. In the original Garden of Eden, the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, did not have to be concerned about purification, as they knew nothing other than purity and cleanliness (Wheeler, 2006, pp. 57–58). But when they taste the fruit of the tree, they begin to produce bodily waste, which in turn induces a state of contamination requiring the performance of ablution. The consumption of crops and meat lies at the foundation of life on this planet and enabled the rise of civilisations, but from a Muslim perspective, they are also a cause of pollution. At the same time, the immaterial and ethereal state of being in the other world appears to be a premise for the prevailing conditions of purity there.⁹ After the fall of man and having lost Paradise, perfume evokes memories of the perfection only to be found in the other world. As we saw above, the product line 'Al-Rayan' indicates that similar associations are being perpetuated even today. According to various sources, Adam, having been separated from the Garden of Eden, felt deeply sad, as he missed its sights and smells (Wheeler, 2006, pp. 63–64, 85–86). To ease his suffering, God commanded Adam to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca and establish a sanctuary there, which might serve as a substitute for the Garden of Eden. The later prohibition by the four schools of Sunni Islamic law against the use of perfume in the sanctuary can be explained with the argument that it derives from the plants growing in the Garden of Eden and would thus not be necessary. Instead, it is the proximity to the Garden of Eden, the reasoning goes, that will lend a sweet smell to the pilgrims. Initially, Muslims were supposed to apply perfume, if they had any, after the full ablution, which had to be performed every seven days (King, 2017, pp. 343–346). Several *ahadith* (Prophetic traditions) attributed to Aisha relate how she scented her husband with perfume, oil or specifically musk before he entered the state of ritual purity (*ihram*) and set out to circumambulate the Kaaba. Aisha is also said to have scented herself with both musk and ambergris when in *ihram*. In spite of the eventual condemnation of the use of aromatics while in *ihram*, Muslims continued to be allowed to apply fragrance to places of worship, such as the Kaaba and the Dome of the Rock. Even before the expansion of Islam, the art historian Nina Ergin (2014, p. 71) observes, fragrance signalled the presence of the divine.

According to the medieval scholar al-Tabari, the existence of perfume in this world can be traced to Adam bringing a rod from one of the trees in the Garden of Eden (Wheeler, 2006, p. 83). In one of the reports, Adam is wearing a wreath

from the trees of the Garden, which, after his fall to earth, dried up and the various types of perfume grew from its scattered leaves. In another report, Adam brings with him not a wreath but branches that he collected from all the trees in the Garden when learning that he would be banished from Paradise. Because the sanctuary was to reproduce the conditions in the Garden of Eden and perfume, deriving from its plants, was nowhere to be found before the fall, the jurists felt obliged to prohibit its use by pilgrims (Wheeler, 2006, p. 65). Apart from places, people – when especially pure – may likewise have a pleasant smell attached to them. Several *hadith* reports state, for instance, that the breath of a fasting person smells like the Garden of Eden (Ergin, 2014, p. 72; Wheeler, 2006, p. 63). And the sweet scent of babies is supposed to derive from Paradise (Lange, 2016, p. 7). The above illustrates a view of the cosmos where this and the other world are opposed to one another insofar as the former is associated with deficiency, volatility and decay, while purity, beauty and eternity are qualities of the latter.

As we are going to see in the following section, one can come across the same outlook among Muslims in the Russian Urals of the present moment.¹⁰ A sweet scent indicates the proximity of the other world. Possibly due to its ability to travel more or less unhindered by physical barriers, fragrance is also considered a vehicle that grants access to a sphere that would otherwise be inaccessible or a kind of adhesive agent that connects the contrary realms.

The other world draws near

Muslims from the Russian Urals recognise the existence of another world next to the one we live in. The other world can be far removed from this world, but it can also open up at unexpected moments or even intrude into this reality to such a degree that its physical laws take precedence over those we are usually subjected to. Central for the argument at hand is the physical reality of the other world, as it emerges to permeate and substitute an environment interpreted only in secular or Orthodox Christian terms. While the above pertains to conceptions, it is often and sometimes only through specific practices that the outside observer becomes aware of them. Muslim believers engage in actions to bring about a transformation. Fragrance is one of the more customary – and evocative – means by which this transformation is marked, and through which the arrival of the other world is announced.

On two different occasions during fieldwork in the Urals, I heard a truly moving account. It is a passage from the *tafsir* (Quranic exegesis) *Ruh al-Bayan*, written by the seventeenth-century Sufi *sheikh* Ismail Haqqi, that the young imam of a mosque in Troitsk shared. In June 2019, we sat with a handful of people on the carpeted floor of the mosque, when the imam related the anecdote to us once again. As Ismail Haqqi wrote, a boy left his home village to fully dedicate himself to Islam. His relatives were worried and sent some religious scholars after him, but upon their return, the latter explained that nothing can be done anymore, as the boy is already enveloped by the smell of Paradise (*zaphā dʒannata*). In this case, commented the imam, the boy's *taqwa*, his yearning for the other world, was simply

too strong. The account is short, but it conveys a forceful message. No information is given as to where and when the story takes place or if the boy was disappointed by the conditions of life he faced in society. But a Tatar reader might be thinking of Tatar village life and imagine the boy subsisting as a hermit in the Russian forest. We understand that this world held no attraction for him anymore. He devotes his life to God, which would include religious practices such as regular ablution, prayer and remembrance of the Almighty. And then, we learn how his firm belief and efforts are rewarded, as the other world reveals itself while he still dwells among the living. Instead of being out of reach, the other world is in fact close to those who have proven themselves. Emitting a heavenly scent, it becomes manifest around this boy, who does not hesitate to relinquish this world for the sake of another.

Another time, the same imam mentioned how the transition from this to the other world is indicated by a pleasant smell. When an especially good person dies, he explained, the body is wrapped in a burial cloth from heaven and an angel opens the gate to the first heaven, from which emanates a beautiful smell, a hundred times better than anything we know. Yet the angel will not open the gate for a bad person, continued the imam, and a foul smell will begin to exude from the dead body. The real consequences of having achieved proximity to the spiritual world were confirmed by another imam from the same town. Those who succeeded in their search for God, one gains the impression, have attained an ambiguous state between life and death. Even though they are biologically dead, elucidated the imam in late June 2019, their bodies remain in a condition that makes them appear almost alive. He recounted how about 20 years ago, some Salafis in Saudi Arabia opened the grave of Hamza ibn Abd al-Muttalib, a relative and companion of the prophet Muhammad, to bury him elsewhere. As they were not careful when transporting the body, it suffered damage and blood flowed from the wound, as if Hamza had still been alive a few hours earlier. We have to understand, said the imam, that these people lived such exemplary lives that they remain entirely pure. When *awliya* ('friends of God' or saints) pass away, we are similarly unable to detect the development of a foul smell. He added that their bodies do not disintegrate and the ground does not claim them. Their bodies dwell more in the spiritual world than in ours.

The Uralic Muslims I was in conversation with associate fragrance with an exposure and a temporary unsealing of the passage to the other world. When the Sufi practitioners from the first paragraph of this chapter engage in the *suhbat* ceremony, the use of fragrance reminds them that the other world is close by or it even draws the other world into the present. In those hours of companionship and theological exchange, they neither entirely inhabit the here and now nor the hereafter. But how do they conceptualise the other world and its relation to this world? Sometimes, we may deduce their conceptions from specific practices and these practices do not necessarily need to involve fragrance. The empirical material also demonstrates the disruptive effect of such conceptions on the more dominant sense of reality.

The people on whose insights I rely here tend to differentiate between this and the other world by using the terms *dunya* and *rukhaniyat*, respectively, although the

other world is occasionally also called spiritual realm (*duhovnoe carstvo*) or *akhirat*. The perception of the other reality is equivalent to the wider Muslim understanding of the realm of the unseen (*al-ghayb*). The invisible world contains all of those beings – spirits, angels, ghosts, jinni – that most humans cannot discern with the naked eye (el-Aswad, 2019, p. 5).¹¹ In the afterlife, however, the hitherto concealed will cease to be unseen and nothing can remain hidden or invisible. For some people, the veil that hides the invisible world may in rare moments be temporarily removed, so they may behold it and cross the divide between this and the other realm (el-Aswad, 2019, pp. 6–8). Endowed with special gifts, some prophets and saints can move more easily and sometimes freely between those spheres. This would be the case for the prophets Muhammad and Idris (Lange, 2016, pp. 6–7). The dreams that come to us while sleeping – with sleep itself considered a partial or minor death – also allow ordinary people to travel to the invisible world and to interact with angels or the dead (el-Aswad, 2019, pp. 9–10).

Figure 4.2 At the graves of relatives and saints, as here at the grave of the Sufi saint Zaynulla Rasulev in the town of Troitsk, the other world is close by, July 2018. Photograph by Jesko Schmoller.

Several people I encountered during fieldwork expressed the idea that the other world is removed from that of human beings, but the boundary between those worlds can be overcome by individuals who seek to draw closer to God. In Ufa, the practising Sufi Azat explained that the two worlds are not far from one another but they are closely entwined. To make his point, he entwined the fingers of his hands. His claim echoes a *hadith*, according to which the Garden and the Fire (heaven and hell) are ‘closer to you than the strap of your sandal’ (Lange, 2016, p. 3). Just as the strap of the sandal sits between one’s toes, the other world cuts through the shared reality of this life and suggests a degree of immanence of the divine in the material world. A cat, Azat continued, can perceive humans as well as angels and jinns, but among our species, the brain and intellect are too developed to perceive the inhabitants of the spiritual world. Alfiya, a female Sufi from Ufa, argued that in the past, the spiritual and material world used to be one, but civilisation made them drift apart. Humans, she is convinced, were able to see devils and had the capacity to communicate with animals by using the language of the earth. As in the story about the loss of Paradise, we here encounter the idea that humans once belonged to the other world. The term civilisation may even be interpreted as the process of Western secularisation, where people abandoned the notion of living in an enchanted universe and instead claimed authority for themselves. Also in the accounts of Sufi *murids* from the Naqshbandi Mujaddidi brotherhood, we might see the other world open up in various places, but the encounter usually does not last all too long. In the summer of 2019, I travelled with a Sufi *murid* from Ufa in Bashkortostan to Aqtöbe in Kazakhstan, where the Sufi *sheikh* assembled his followers. Towards the evening in the vicinity of Orenburg – not all that far anymore from the border with Kazakhstan – we spotted a police control in the distance but my fellow traveller and driver, Ibrahimjan, asserted that we are not going to be stopped. He turned out to be right and assured me of the direct intervention of the *sheikh* in our affairs, a consequence of which he describes as ‘opening the door to the *rukhaniyat*’, or other world. Nothing bad will happen to us, he said, as we are already part of the spiritual world. When Sufi *murids* swear the oath of allegiance (*bayat*) to their *sheikh* or teacher, the spiritual world is placed inside of them. He added that this does not mean, however, that they will constantly dwell in the other world. As I interpret these words, the *murids* gain access to the other world upon joining the brotherhood. This helps differentiate them from both infidels and common Muslims. Their eyes were opened to the reality beyond this reality. The next day, after we attended the assembly with the *sheikh*, we drove to a horse farm for a spontaneous retreat. On this occasion, we took along an old Kazakh man with a good sense of humour, who declared that after our participation in the *bayat* ceremony we now carry passports and can be considered citizens of the spiritual realm. In our new condition, we are more from the spiritual realm than the material world and we fly with the angels in the air. Once more, a transition from one sphere to the other takes place.

In other situations, the boundary between this and the other world is regarded as thoroughly fluid and permeable. Individuals from the current generation of Uralic Muslims and their ancestors, both the living and the dead, engage in an

ongoing dialogue and exchange (Kefeli, 2014b, pp. 604–606). In a discussion in mid-June 2019 with a mullah, a mosque leader without an official religious education, from the village of Kubovo in Bashkortostan, he explained that we came from the other world and eventually we will return to it. Therefore, nothing can be more important than commemorating the dead (McMurray, this volume). As we visited a spot where in the past a major battle took place, he pointed out that the dead are standing all around, watching us and listening to our conversation. With the *azan*, they assemble and after the prayer for their benefit (*dua*) they thank us. When speaking about the gratitude of the dead, he took a formal bow. It is through our intervention, he added, that they can ascend to the seven heavens.

As these vignettes illustrate, contact with the other world can be brief, but it is nevertheless sufficient to rupture a widely established sense of space and time; concepts that are apparently impossible to reconcile with the conditions of existence in the elsewhere. We saw how a person might switch from one realm to the other when driving a car. As I attended the meeting with the *sheikh* of the above-mentioned Naqshbandi Mujaddidi branch in Aqtöbe in summer 2019, I was confronted with a further perception of time. Since we drove all night with practically no rest, I felt quite exhausted after the arrival at our destination. I was permitted to rest for a while in the prayer room of an unofficial mosque. Eventually, I got up again and joined a group of Sufi *murids* that includes my driver, who, to my surprise, looks young and fresh, even though the tour of the previous night must have exhausted him much more than me. Making this observation, a Kazakh *murid* responded that space and time do not exist in the other world and whereas one might need 8 hours of sleep in the material world this is not the case in the spiritual one. Here, one must keep in mind that Muslim believers who think of the other world as close by will be less surprised than other Muslims or non-believers by those changes occurring in their environment. While it might be not entirely accurate to argue that they simultaneously inhabit two worlds and thus two temporalities, they are certainly used to miracles (*karamat*) interfering with their routines; in this case, switching from one mode of being to the other. Russian Muslims may find that in their everyday surroundings, little consideration is shown for their faith, their culture or history. But then, they also experience those moments where the seemingly all-pervading force of secular conviction or Russian Orthodox entitlement reaches a limit, reassuring them of their own presence and the eternal truth of their beliefs. Instead of being confined to a life in a universe whose rules are made by others, they can partake in the experience of living in an enchanted universe.

The sudden dissolution of the concepts of space and time as they apply to life in this world, I want to suggest, have to be interpreted from a decolonial perspective. As an interpretive frame, decolonial studies may be of use when arguing for the physical substance of the transformations taking place but they can also assist us to recognise this process as a kind of world-making. Criticising the involuntary reproduction of dominant assumptions and perspectives, the sociologist Martin Savransky (2017, 2012) points out that the epistemological approach to the phenomena of the world around us usually goes unquestioned. Motivated by the work of the anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and others, he challenges the dominance of

Western science over our perception and instead suggests to turn to ontology, which in this context means to seriously engage with the conceptions and cosmologies of non-Western cultures by not only accepting them as other interpretations of one and the same reality but also by recognising them as other realities. Taking up this proposition, I see no reason to question the existence of a Muslim elsewhere and the possibility of its manifestation in different moments and places. On the way to Kazakhstan, we pass the police control because the *sheikh* looked out for us and allowed the car to momentarily slip into the invisible realm. At our destination in Aqtöbe, the driver Ibrahimjan does not feel tired, as the spiritual world has taken shape around us and supplies him with energy. Another state of being takes over and affects both physical bodies and material matter.

Conclusion

In the Russian Urals, the conceptualisations from the previous section are usually associated with those Muslims whose beliefs and religious practices can be considered indicative of local or vernacular Islam (Schmoller, 2020). Muslim believers act with the coming world in mind. They live in a society that cares little for their convictions and way of life. Secular-minded Russians may regard their religious conceptions and practices as irrational and obsolete. Some Orthodox Christians, in turn, think of Islam as foreign and threatening. And in the ongoing search for a new Russian national identity, Islam does not seem to be considered.

In comparison with most other European countries, who did not have to overcome the traumatic breakdown of the Soviet state, Russia constitutes an exception. Both the experience of state collapse and its geographical position at the edges of Europe would indicate quite different political currents and constellations. Indeed, one cannot easily apply analytical categories that prove useful in political contexts elsewhere to the circumstances in Russia. Even so, one may discern striking similarities with other European nationalist projects, first and foremost the obsession with a past that never existed (Kaya & De Cesari, 2020, pp. 3–5). Across the continent, ‘present pasts’ are now becoming urgent social and political concerns. And while memory and cultural heritage provide some with a stable identity, the exhibition *Rossiya – Moya Istoriya* briefly portrayed above is just one example for how they can also be the reason for the exclusion of others. The effort of separating Islam from Russia – may it be an explicit aim or only a side effect – must strike those who are aware of the centuries of cultural contact and co-existence as nothing less than an attempt to rewrite history. In some European countries, the more recent preoccupation with the past can further be accompanied with a re-evaluation of the state’s involvement with colonialism (Kaya & De Cesari, 2020, p. 9). Russia never had an easy relationship to its own colonial history and the term continues to be avoided, but it seems as if a certain positive attitude towards it can again be detected (Morrison, 2016). Irrespective of making references to it in museum exhibitions or history books, the everyday lives of people of Muslim minority background confirm the persistence of the colonial past in the present, or what Ann Laura Stoler calls ‘tenacious durabilities’ (Stoler, 2016). As long as the government

does not come to terms with the mistakes committed by the political predecessors, problematic patterns of thinking are going to be reproduced in the population. The confinement of Muslim presence to be observed in Moscow, while Orthodox Christian devotion flourishes, is only one consequence of such thinking.

But Muslims must not despair, as they realise that a better world is underway. When the time has come, Islam is going to be reinstated and humankind enters a period of serenity. This is followed by the annihilation of all life on earth, the end of history and a new existence in the other world. For now, however, Uralic Muslims carry on with their lives in a flawed environment, while the presence of God and the truth of the Muslim faith are being confirmed by small signs and genuine miracles. Over the previous centuries, Russian Muslims had to endure first the attempt of forcibly converting them to Orthodox Christianity and then the banishment of religion within a Godless state. They were told that they adhere to a false belief and that their God is nothing but a delusion. But it turns out that God never left them and the other world has been close by all along. At least some of them live in an enchanted universe, where *sheikhs* direct their movement, angels fly through the sky above their heads and they engage in a regular exchange with the dead. And this other reality is being revealed and comes into being through their practices: prayer in the cemetery, local Muslim pilgrimage and saint veneration, *sulhat* and *bayat*.

The process of another reality taking shape is not to be understood in a metaphorical sense. When people seek encounters with Muslim saints, those saints are not regarded as only metaphorically alive. The physical reality of the divine becomes similarly apparent in the accounts of especially pious individuals, whose bodies remain perfectly preserved even centuries after they passed away. And the heavenly scent of Paradise enveloping a place or person is more than merely imagination. Occasionally, the other reality is literally inscribed in the landscape, as when a Muslim pilgrim points out that in a drone picture we can recognise the name Allah in the formation of a mountain or in the windings of a river. In those places, the land is marked as God's creation and the ground can be considered sacred. The actions that Muslims take with the other world in mind betray a lived religious culture that counters efforts to make this heritage disappear from people's perception. By recalling and reviving such a heritage, Muslims in Russia are implicated in a politics of reality. Its disruptive effect is probably due to the radical contrast between the hegemonic sense of reality and Muslim vernacular tradition. For the moment, we have to recall, Muslim culture remains a minority culture in Russia. This is not to say that the situation will not change over the coming decades. The demographics are shifting in favour of the Muslim population.¹² In the Urals, mosques are reopened and built in cities, towns and villages; people once more move on the old paths of pilgrimage and discover further sacred sites. Older forms of translocal connection and sociality – for instance between Russia and Kazakhstan – are being remembered, but Muslims also realise themselves as attached to their homeland with its deep forests and holy springs, its graves of revered saints and rich Islamic history. The difficult past has taught them to carve out a place for themselves.

As the land around slowly awakes to another reality, the other world is being exposed to varying degrees. In some instances, it has come close to momentarily replacing this reality, but in other situations it might only be a heavenly light beam that illuminates people's daily routines or the scent of musk wafting over from the Garden of Paradise. Sometimes, nothing but the pleasant smell of fragrance will suggest the proximity of the invisible realm. But we should not underestimate either the evocative power of smell or our ability to draw the right conclusions from it. Most certainly, many of us have become too comfortable in relying on sight since, in the Age of Enlightenment, it assumed the rank of master sense to the detriment of the other senses (Classen, Howes & Synnott, 1994, p. 4; Shaw, 2019).¹³ For certain Uralic Muslims, though, it does not constitute an impossible task to perceive the other world through the sense of smell. Fragrance here does more than evoke a distant place or bygone event. Since it links the two disparate spheres, taking in the scent of *misk* also enables Muslim believers to look ahead and beyond the current conditions. Associating fragrance with a utopian vision of a future Muslim existence in Russia might be going too far, but it does at least hold the promise that another world is possible.

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Notes

- 1 If asked to draw a comparison, I see a certain resemblance with post-socialist developments in the Balkans, where the states that emerged from the fragments of former Yugoslavia also interpreted their traditions, cultures and legacies in an exclusive manner, which sometimes meant dismissing the role of Islam in both history and culture (Elbasani, 2017, pp. 10–14).
- 2 A research paper that attends to this case is currently in development.
- 3 See Pedersen (2011) for religion *as* politics in Mongolia. De Certeau (1988) writes about the silent protest within the patterns of our routine behaviour.
- 4 I am here specifically referring to the people I was in contact with. Without question, not all practising Muslims in the Russian Urals share the same sentiments.
- 5 This is not the place to go into a nuanced analysis of Eurasianism in its manifold interpretations. I am likewise ignoring the difference between Eurasianism and neo-Eurasianism. For more information, see Marlène Laruelle (2008).
- 6 The project website can be accessed here: <https://myhistorypark.ru/>. Marlène Laruelle (2018) describes the exhibition as the ROC's conquest of the history market.

- 7 See Bialasiewicz (2017) for a discussion of Muslim visibility in urban space.
- 8 See also Ergin (2014, p. 72).
- 9 This idea also seems to be informing a religious practice among the Uyghurs of Xinjiang, where the smell of fried pancakes becomes nourishment for the spirits of the dead (Bellér-Hann 2001, p. 20). Indeed, the spirits do not desire the pancakes themselves, but it is the fragrance of the boiling oil that provides them with sustenance.
- 10 The fundamental contrast between the other and this world may be more representative of a specific Sufi cosmology than of dominant religious perspectives, however. Lange (2016, p. 5) confirms that perfection is reserved for the afterlife, but he also points out that the world inhabited by humankind is not a place of corruption.
- 11 For more information on *al-ghayb*, see the special issue by Bubandt, Rytter and Suhr (2019).
- 12 If currently the Muslim minority in Russia amounts with about 15 million people to approximately 11 per cent of the overall population, their share is expected to increase at least three times by 2050 (Laruelle, 2016).
- 13 Bubandt, Rytter and Suhr (2019) write in this context about the ‘empire of the gaze’.

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