

# The Cult of Saints (Awliya) and Pilgrims in Social Networks (Based on the Materials of the Republic of Bashkortostan, Russia)

===== Ainur I. Tuzbekov, Albert T. Akhatov =====

The article analyses the practice of pilgrimages to the graves of awliya (Islamic saints) in the Republic of Bashkortostan. The authors propose that pilgrims should be studied as a distinct socio-cultural group using the methods of online research. In the course of the research, digital netnography methods were applied by scientists to study the internet group “Sufi RB”, created and moderated by the followers of the Naqshbandiyya Haqqani Tariqah. The results of the study of pilgrims as a socio-cultural group using digital netnography methods, supplemented with the results of field surveys, indicate that this approach is effective and provide a basis for its use in scientific research.<sup>1</sup>

KEYWORDS: archaeological sites, sacred sites, awliya, pilgrimage, Sufism, social networks, netnography, internet communities

Članek analizira prakso romanja na grobove awliya (islamskih svetnikov) v Republiki Baškortostan. Avtorji predlagajo, da bi bilo treba romanje preučevati kot posebno družbeno-kulturno skupino z uporabo metod spletnega raziskovanja. Med raziskavo so znanstveniki uporabili metode digitalne netnografije za preučevanje spletne skupine »Sufi RB«, ki so jo ustvarili in moderirali privrženci Naqshbandiyya Haqqani Tariqah. Rezultati preučevanja romanjev kot družbeno-kulturne skupine z uporabo metod digitalne netnografije, dopolnjeni z rezultati terenskih raziskav, kažejo, da je ta pristop učinkovit in daje podlago za njegovo uporabo v znanstvenih raziskavah.<sup>2</sup>

KLJUČNE BESEDE: arheološka najdišča, sveti kraji, awliya, romanje, sufizem, družbena omrežja, netnografija, internetne skupnosti

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## INTRODUCTION

During field research, the staff of the Department of Archaeological Heritage of the Southern Urals at the R.G. Kuzeev Institute of Ethnological Research, Ufa Federal Research Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences recorded numerous instances of the use of archaeological monuments in modern cult and ritual practices by both representatives of traditional and non-traditional beliefs and teachings.

The research conducted between 2013 and 2023 identified three universal directions of the sacralization of archaeological sites in the Southern Urals:

1. Islam in the formation of holy places;
2. New religious movements in search of “places of power”;
3. Archaic cults and archaeological sites.

In identifying the features of sacralization, it was established that the majority of archaeological sites in the territory of the Republic of Bashkortostan, Russia, could be categorised under the first direction (Tuzbekov 2018: 79).

From our perspective, this may be explained by the way Islam has been spreading and developing in Russia. In the early stages, it was closely related to Sufism, a distinctive mystical and ascetic branch of Islam. Sufism includes religious and philosophical teachings, as well as various practices (asceticism, meditation, physical exercises, etc.), which eventually enable a Muslim to unite with Allah. To achieve this, a Muslim needs help from spiritual teachers and mentors, called sheikhs or murshids in Sufism, who guide the Murid students (Sufi disciples) in their pursuit of union with God.

The most enlightened, well-known and revered mentors became ishans who founded individual schools and branches called tariqahs in Sufism. These are also known as Sufi brotherhoods. The spiritual leaders (ishans) themselves were often considered “saints” (awliya in Arabic) during their lifetime and were venerated as such.

The followers of Sufism (Sufis) were often actively involved in spreading Islam to different parts of the world, adapting Muslim teaching to local ethno-confessional characteristics and traditions. In this way, they contributed to mixing Islamic canons with local pagan beliefs. As a result, in some areas the burial places of mythical heroes or real people, including sheikhs and ishans, became objects of worship for local residents (Islam 1991: 221–231).

This is also the case in the Southern Urals, where the widespread practice of venerating the graves of saints (awliya) by the Muslim population (mainly Bashkir) is closely related to the cult of ancestors. It is also related to the cult of Ishans, where the objects of worship are primarily funerary and religious buildings. These include mounds, stone constructions, mausoleums, etc., which locals believe to be the burial sites of certain saints.

Thus, owing to the extensive activity of the Sufi sheikhs of the brotherhood of Isawiya (XIV–XV centuries) and the brotherhood of Naqshbandiya-Mujaddidiya (XVIII–XIX centuries), from the XIV century onwards the cult of Ishans started to spread among the Bashkirs. It involved venerating ishans as saints and their graves as holy places where worship and sacrifices were performed. The cult was associated with the ability to work miracles (karamatas), heal and foresee the future (Tuzbekov 2018: 80). It is also worth

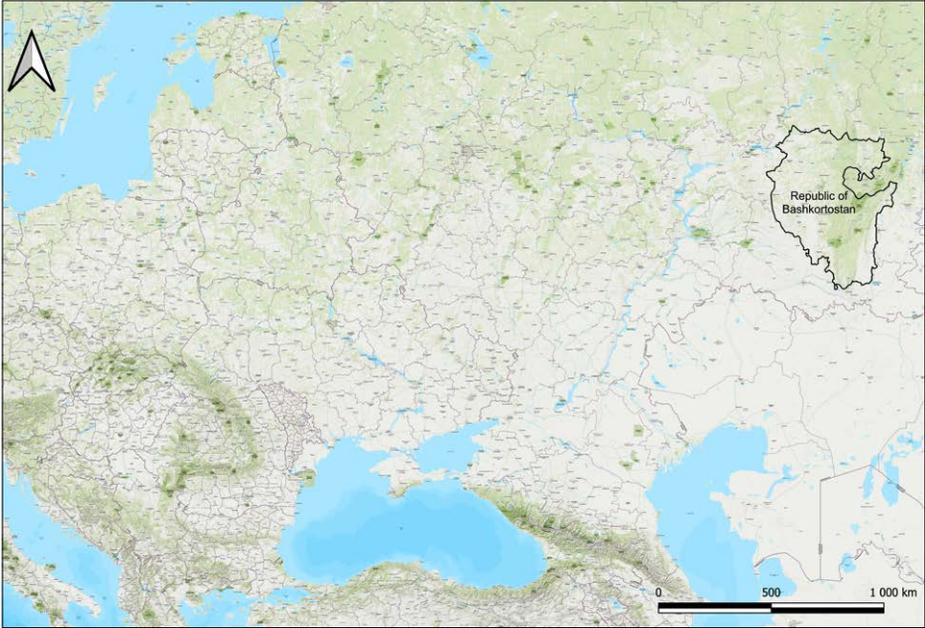


Figure 1: The location of Republic of Bashkortostan.

mentioning that from the very beginning, the construction and functioning of Sufi sacred burial sites was initiated and supported by the sheikhs themselves (Ismoilov 2019: 27–28).

The Naqshbandi Tariqah of Haqqania is a Sufi brotherhood that has played a significant role in the revival and development of Sufism in the Republic of Bashkortostan (Yusupov, Berdin 2017; Tsibenko 2019). Its followers now play an important role in the Muslim community, annually organising a number of mass events related to the worship of saints whose graves are located at archaeological sites in the Southern Urals (Fig. 1). These include the hillfort of Sandiyak (Kuedinsky District, Perm Krai), the mausoleums of *Hussein-bek* and *Tura-khan* (Chishminsky District, Bashkortostan Republic), the medieval necropolis of Ilchigulovo IV (Miyakinsky District, Republic of Bashkortostan), etc. (Fig. 2).

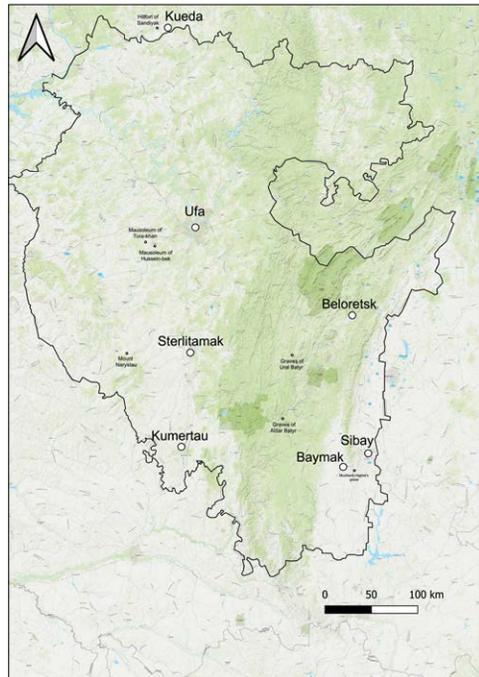


Figure 2: Republic of Bashkortostan. Cities, towns and sacred objects.

The complexes organized at the site of the medieval necropolis of Ilchigulovo-IV, located on Mount Narystau (Miyakinsky District, Republic of Bashkortostan), are the most striking example of an object of archaeological heritage associated with the graves of XIV century nomads that has been given sacred significance.

The process of sacralising the archaeological monument and the surrounding territory has been mentioned in previously published research (Tuzbekov, Bakhshiev 2015; Tuzbekov, Bakhshiev 2019). However, the people visiting the site, the frequency of their visits and the rituals they perform were not covered by the study.

While studying the morphology of the sacred archaeological sites and the structures built around them, the researchers repeatedly conducted surveys of pilgrims who came to honor the holy places. Many of them were willing to share how they had learnt about the the holy place, but they avoided answering questions on personal and social matters. In the course of the survey, it was found that online communities were one of the main sources of knowledge about holy places.

Many of the pilgrims also used the internet as a means of religious communication – to socialize with like-minded people and co-religionists through various online groups, or to search for information on specific matters in Islam, including information about saints, their burial sites, the arrangements of collective prayers, etc.

The surveys and interviews with pilgrims did not provide enough information to give a general description of the people who visit sacred archaeological sites, their interests, the rites and rituals they perform, the frequency of their visits or their reasons for visiting the holy places. In this regard, having considered various sources, it was concluded that the most accessible and informative means of learning about this issue is to study the materials published by the pilgrims themselves in virtual communities on the internet. This entails studying the way they interact and communicate, as well as their internet profile. According to H. Rheingold, a virtual community is a group of people who may or may not meet each other face to face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks (Rozhdestvenskaya, Semenova 2014: 24).

The purpose of this work is to study the socio-cultural characteristics and interests of Muslim pilgrims who visit the sacred sites in the Republic of Bashkortostan, including archaeological sites. This analysis is based on the analysis of the SufiRB internet community in the VKontakte social network.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> VKontakte (international name ‘VK’) is a Russian social network created by the Durov brothers in 2006. It is one of the three most visited websites in the Russian part of the internet, the so-called Runet. The network is analogous to the world’s largest social network, Facebook. In July 2022, the daily audience of the platform in Russia amounted to 49.1 million people. The monthly Russian audience amounted to 75.7 million people. A total 53% of Russian internet users visit Vkontakte on a daily basis. At the same time, the monthly coverage of the Runet reaches 83% (VKontakte 2022). The total monthly audience of VKontakte in all countries is 100 million users. According to data from SimilarWeb, as of 1 January 2021, the VKontakte website ranked fifteenth in popularity in the world. In this regard, we decided to analyse the groups on this platform.

## RESEARCH METHODS

To achieve the objective of the study, netnography methods were used. The term “netnography” was first introduced by R. V. Kozinetz. In his opinion, the essence of modern netnography is a specific set of related research practices for collecting, analyzing and presenting data, as well as the ethical standards for conducting such research.

According to the scheme developed by R. Kozinetz, an online study should consist of five steps:

1. determination of a research issue or problem
2. identification of the communities
3. participant observation and data collection
4. data analysis and repeated multiple interpretations of the findings
5. preparation and presentation of the results, their theoretical application (Kozinetz 2010: 79).

Having applied the above scheme and determined the aim of the study, the following objectives were set:

1. give a general description of the participants of the internet groups that organise and visit sacred archaeological monuments
2. draw up an average generalized profile of the virtual community members
3. determine the interests of the online community members
4. determine the main types of content produced, the level of perception and activity of the members
5. study the main producers and consumers of the content
6. characterize the posts of the internet community and determine their main topics

In order to achieve the objectives, the following aspects were investigated:

- group members' profile data
- the communicational activity of the group members
- messages, comments, reposts (re-posts), likes (approval) of current and most discussed topics by the members.

The study analyzes both the structural and attribute variables of the data, which were obtained using the vk.barkov.net and socstat.ru resources. To achieve the intended aim and fulfill the objectives of the study, the most efficient method was to analyze the communicational activity of members, posts and comments. It was therefore decided to continue analysing the internet groups in the VKontakte social network and to use the methods previously tested by researchers (Kozinetz 2010; Bikkulov, Pashkevich, Chugunov 2012; Polukhina 2014).

The research is limited to an online study, supplemented by previously collected field material. For this purpose, digital netnography tools were mainly used (referring to the third type of netnography). According to R. Kozinetz, digital netnography combines all methods of data analysis, including software for recognizing words and languages, calculating and representing social connections based on human understanding and comprehension.

He believes that human interpretation takes precedence over all forms of mechanical understanding, as it considers the context when analyzing data (Kozinetz 2010: 79).

The visual method of analyzing photo and video materials, widely used in ethnography, was also applied.

The content published in the group was analysed using the sociometric method with the resource <http://popsters.ru>. This is a service for statistics and content analytics of social network communities. The analysis included the quantity and type of content published, as well as the activity of the audience between the moment of creation and 31.12. 2022.

In order to specify the community parameters from 10 October 2014 to 31 December 2022, an automated research method was applied together with the resource [vk.barkov.net](http://vk.com/barkov.net) to collect data about the group and its members. The objectives of the study were to compare the popularity of information posted within the communities. To evaluate it, the engagement rate per post was calculated, the engagement rate (ER) being a metric used to assess the average number of interactions your social media content receives per follower. The engagement rate is calculated as the total number of interactions the content receives divided by the total number of followers, multiplied by 100%.

#### THE OBJECT OF THE STUDY

As mentioned above, when it comes to the number of archaeological sites with signs of sacralization, direction 1 (Islam in the formation of holy places) predominates in the territory of the Republic of Bashkortostan. Meanwhile, the most active organizers of events at holy sites are adherents of the Naqshbandiyya Haqqani Tariqah. The decision was therefore made to study the virtual communities of this particular tariqah.

According to Stephane A. Dudoignon, a modern researcher of Sufism, representatives of this branch are among the leaders in developing global cyberspace among all Sufi tariqahs (Dudoignon 2020).

When “Sufism” was entered in the category of communities, the VKontakte search engine identified about 80 Internet pages with members numbering from ten to several thousand. Some of these are virtual Sufi communities of the Naqshbandi Tariqah, followers of Shaikh Muhammad (Mehmet) Adil al Haqqani, who has greatly contributed to the revival and development of Sufism in Bashkortostan.

The goals outlined in the profile information about these groups corresponded to the four main goals of the majority of online communities described by J. Preece: “to exchange information, to get answers to questions or send information; to provide support conveying sympathy or expressing emotions verbally or non-verbally; to communicate informally using synchronous communication; to discuss ideas, which, as a rule, requires the help of a moderator” (Rozhdestvenskaya, Semenova 2014: 27).

The initial analysis showed that the largest number of members from Bashkortostan belonged to the following groups:

1. Sufism. The Path of the Heart. The Way to God (<https://vk.com/club38488863>);
2. Sheikh Muhammad (Mehmet) Adil Haqqani Naqshbandi (<https://vk.com/sheikhnazim>);
3. Tariqah Naqshbandi. Sohbet, quotes, books (<https://vk.com/naqshbandrus>) and
4. Sufi RB (<https://vk.com/club78436717>).

Despite the assertion by M. Castells that internet communities are formed on the basis of a shared interest rather than any geographical location (Castells 2004: 153), the last group “Sufi RB” was selected as the object of the research for the reasons set forth below.

The main principles of unity in this community (the only one containing the name of the region in its title) are the subscribers’ territory of residence and interest in Sufism, as well as in the activities of Shaikh Muhammad (Mehmet) Adil al Haqqani. The study of members’ profiles showed that among all the people who indicated their location (66%), the majority (71%) live in the Republic of Bashkortostan (the details are specified below).

The community’s geographical connection with the region is confirmed by the link to the associated website “Sufi Order of Naqshbandi Rabbani in the Republic of Bashkortostan”, dedicated to the present topic (Sufi Order 2022). Many posts are also made in the Bashkir language, which is spoken by the local Bashkir and Tatar populations.

Moreover, the members of the group turned out to be subscribers to mainly regional and city news feeds, as well as Bashkir national communities, which also indicates their geographical connection to the region.

The trips undertaken by members of the group to sacred sites located in the territory of the Republic of Bashkortostan, such as Mount Narystau (Miyakinsky District, Republic of Bashkortostan), Ural Batyr’s grave (Beloretsky District, Republic of Bashkortostan), Muzhavor–Hazrat’s grave (Baymaysky District, Republic of Bashkortostan), etc. to hold collective celebrations and prayers, are confirmed by numerous photo and video materials posted on the community walls.

It is also worth noting that this group’s audience makes up a significant share in almost all the above-mentioned communities (among those indicating their location): Sufism. The Path of the Heart. The Way to God – 7%, Shaikh Muhammad (Mehmet) Adil Haqqani Naqshbandi – 17%, Tariqah Naqshbandi. Sohbets, quotes, books – 16%.

The analysis of posts made it possible to attribute the group “Sufi RB” to the so-called community of “multimodal social worlds” (under the classification of A.C. Garcia, A.I. Standl, J. Bechkoff, Y. Cui). According to the researchers, the particularity of such on-line communities means they should be studied using both online and offline methods to obtain some aggregate material (Polukhina 2014: 97).

The data on the group and its members was obtained with the help of the resource vk.barkov.net, which is a universal set of tools that enables the convenient extraction of a wide variety of data from social networks. Based on the collected material posted from 10 October 2014 to 31 December 2022, it was possible to form summary tables containing open, structural and attribute variables. This allowed for the identification of sex and age characteristics, as well as the place of residence of the members.

In accordance with the guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers, the received information was generalized and depersonalized. Therefore, the work does not contain users’ personal information and does not have links to personal pages. The study involved the analysis of exclusively open data, posted by the users of the social network themselves, who had accepted the Rules of Protection of User Information of the website vk.com, and expressed their awareness that in accordance with clause 6.2 of the rules, the information they post is available to any registered user of the website.

## TYPICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE INTERNET GROUP AND SUBSCRIBERS

The Internet community “Sufi RB” was created on 10th October 2014. At the time of data collection – the end of December 2022, the group had 811 members (751 discounting the blocked and deleted members). During the specified period of time, 1,915 posts and 185 comments were recorded in total.

The “Information” section states: “Khaja Amina, the wife of Mawlana Sheikh Nazimm, was from Bashkortostan...” This clearly emphasises the great importance of the region for the Sufi community. The group has one administrator. Publication of materials by other members is restricted by the settings. The administrator re-published the materials of only four authors. Three of them are men and one is a woman living in the Republic of Bashkortostan and Saint Petersburg.

In accordance with the rules of Vkontakte, members are required to indicate their gender when registering. As a result, it was found that the majority of individuals in the group were women (57%), while the number of men was comparatively lower (43%).

The indicated gender gradation is generally consistent with the data on the active audience of the Russian segment on Vkontakte at the end of 2022. This data indicates that 27.9 million authors were registered on the platform, of whom 59.5% were women and 40.5% were men (Tcherny 2022).

Almost half of the members (44%) indicated their year of birth on their personal pages. The distribution of these years was as follows: under 17 years old (3.3%), 18–29 years old (9%), 30–39 years old (24%), 40–49 years old (20%), over 50 years old (43%). The obtained data indicate that almost half the group members are people aged over 50.

These results are consistent with the available field materials gathered in the years 2013–2018, when it was noted that the main visitors to the holy places were women, most often middle-aged and older.

The predominance of women is probable due to their high level of religiosity and special psycho-emotional and physiological state. According to Russian researchers, women are much more likely to attend churches than men, they belong to so-called sectarian communities and are subject to superstitions – belief in witchcraft, divination, omens, fate, prophetic dreams, the evil eye, etc. (Ryazanova, Mikhaleva 2011: 24, 36).

Most of the members of the group under study indicated their country (74%) and place of residence (62%). The data reveal that the vast majority of those who indicated their country of residence live in the Russian Federation (95%). Of those who indicated their place of residence, 62% live in settlements within the Republic of Bashkortostan, and a significant proportion of these (44%) reside in Ufa and 2% each in the towns of Sibay, Beloretsk, Baymak, Sterlitamak and Kumertau. It should be noted that, with the exception of Ufa, most of the members live in cities and villages in the southern and southeastern parts of the region, which are inhabited mainly by the Bashkir population.

The analysis of the profiles of the community members showed that almost a quarter have a higher education (27%). Most of them are graduates of Bashkir State University, Zagir Ismagilov Ufa State Institute of Arts and Bashkir State Agrarian University.

Despite the fact that the Vkontakte User License Agreement states that when registering the user is obliged to provide all the necessary reliable and up-to-date information for the formation of a personal page, many prefer to remain anonymous and may publish false information about themselves. This is why, when analyzing internet communities, it is important to study the interests and information interaction between members.

One of the vk.barkov.net resource tools was used to determine the interests of the group members. It makes it possible to take into account other communities in which the group members participate (Table 1).

Name of the Internet group	The number of members who are also members of the internet group Sufi.rb	Total members	Audience percentage
Shaikh Muhammad (Mehmet) Adil al Haqqani	168	1,385	21%
Verhovnyj muftij Talgat Tadzhuiddin (Grand <i>Mufti</i> Talgat Tadzhuiddin)	137	9,747	17%
Serlyshyjek, Bashkortostan (Keep a secret Bashkortostan)	128	126,498	16%
BASHKORT YIRZARI (Bashkirian songs)	126	55,937	16%
Novosti Respubliki Bashkortostan i Ufy (BST) (News of the Republic of Bashkortostan and Ufa (BST))	118	184,989	15%
Bashkirs kaya domohozayjka (Bashkir housewife)	113	194,124	14%
Moya Ufa   Novosti (My Ufa   News)	112	301,148	14%
BASHKORTTAR – BASHKORTLAR (Bashkirs)	111	30,287	14%
Novosti Ufy i Respubliki Bashkortostan (News of Ufa and the Republic of Bashkortostan)	107	462,883	13%
BASHKIRKA (Bashkir women)	104	32,876	13%

Table 1: The ten most popular virtual communities that members of the Sufi.rb group belong to.

It was found that the group's members are mainly interested in Islamic topics and Sufism, and are members of Bashkir communities. A large share of them had subscriptions to the personal internet page of Talgat Safich Tadzhuiddin, the chairman of the Central Duma of Russia (the oldest functioning all-Russian religious Muslim organization in the country). His popularity is probably due to his willingness to accept new Muslim parishes into his organization or his friendly relationship with the current spiritual leader of the Naqshbandi Tariqah Haqqaniah – Sheikh Muhammad (Mehmet) Adil Haqqani, whom he repeatedly invited to visit Bashkortostan.

Having analyzed the interests of the group members, it can be concluded that in addition to Islam and Sufism, the audience of the community is also interested in regional and urban news aggregators, as well as popular Bashkir national communities.

## INFORMATIONAL INTERACTION BETWEEN MEMBERS

Apart from general information about the group members, it was also decided to study their behavioral characteristics and their reactions to the posted materials (likes, reposts, comments, views). For this purpose, the tools of the internet resource <http://popsters.ru> were employed. The content and type of published materials (Table 2) were analysed, as well as audience activity from the creation of the community until 31 December 2022 (Fig. 3).

Indicators	Online community Sufi RB
<b>Content</b>	
Posts	1,915
Photos	247
Texts	1,834
Videos	51
Links	713
<b>Activity</b>	
Likes	17,467
Reposts	2,525
Comments	185
Views	398,342
<b>Activity by content type</b>	
Photos	51%
Texts	23%
Videos	18%
Links	8%
<b>Engagement by content type</b>	
Photos	11.7%
Texts	5.2%
Videos	4.1%
Links	1.8%
<b>Engagement rate</b>	
Engagement Rate per post (ERpost)	1.3%
Engagement Rate per day (ERday)	0.8%
Love Rate (LR)	1.1%
Talk Rate (TR)	0.0119%
Visibility Rate (VRpost)	25.6%

Table 2: Content and audience activity.

As is the case with many online VKontakte virtual communities, the published materials in the group under consideration are represented by a combination of text, links, and photographic and video materials. Having analyzed the relative activity by type of content, it can be concluded that participants are almost twice as interested in photographic

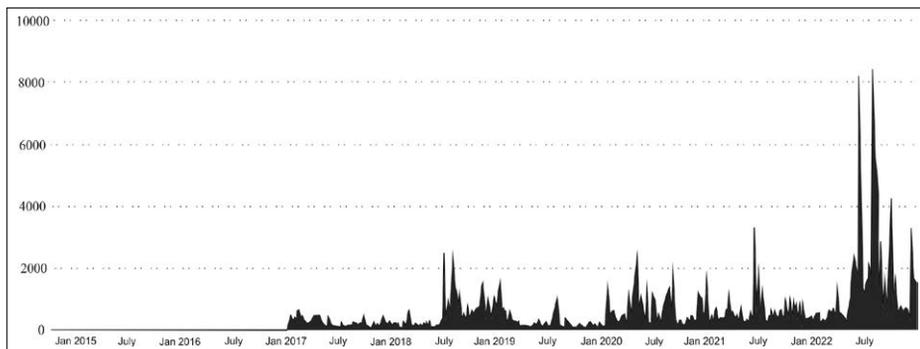


Figure 3: The number of views of community publications from the date of creation of the community until 31. 12. 2022 (accounting for viewing publications in the settings, enabled since 2017).

materials (51%) as they are in text (23%) and video clips (18%) published on the community wall. At the same time, the results of the study on the activity of the internet community audience in 2022 indicated that the VKontakte network was primarily used as follows: video (18.8%), photo (34.3%), text (31.9%) and links (15.0%) (Kalin, Kushnir 2022).

In our opinion, the considerable interest in photographs is due to the fact that this format is the simplest for users to perceive. It is easier for people to look at photographs than to read texts, especially since the materials were made in the territory of the Republic during *sobhets*, i.e. meetings, where conversations on religious topics, collective celebrations, etc. were held.

Another point worth noting is that the number of views of posts in this group increased significantly in 2022. The most popular ones are dedicated to events at the Aldar Batyr (Aldar Isikaev – tarkhan, batyr, head of the Burzyansk volost, leader of the Bashkir uprising of 1704–1711, an outstanding political figure) memorial complex (Burzyansky District, Republic of Bashkortostan), the grave of Ural Batyr (Beloretsky District, Republic of Bashkortostan) and on Mount Narystau (Ilchigulovo IV, kurgan burial ground) (Miyakinsky District, Republic of Bashkortostan).

In order to study the main consumers and producers of content, three tables were formed, which included the data obtained from studying the personal pages of members who had been active (likes, reposts, comments) in the community once, 50 or 100 times.

Initially, the study covered the profiles of members who had been active more than once. This yielded a total of 658 members, of whom 67% were women and 33% men. Slightly more than half of the members (53%) indicated their age, 57% of them being over 50 years old, 20% were between 40 and 49 years old, 15% were between 30 and 39 years old, and 11% were younger than 29 years old. Of the 72% of participants who indicated their country of residence, 98% lived in the Russian Federation. Sixty percent indicated their region of residence and the majority (76%) were from cities and villages within the Republic of Bashkortostan. The largest number of active members lived in Ufa (36%) and other cities and villages, mainly in the southern and southwestern parts of Bashkortostan.

Eight members had been active more than 50 times – four women and four men. Of the five people who gave their age, two women were 49 and 53 years old, and the men were 32, 34 and 41 years old. As for those who gave their place of residence, three were from Ufa, one person from Beloretsk (city of Beloretsk, Republic of Bashkortostan) and one from Kueda (village of Kueda, Perm Krai).

The majority of the five most active members (more than 100 activities) were men (three individuals). Of the three people who gave their age, one woman was 49 years old, and the men were 32 and 34 years old. Of the three people who indicated their place of residence, two lived in Ufa and one was from the village of Kueda. A preliminary examination of the profiles and publications on the walls revealed that almost all of them reposted materials from the SufiRB group, as well as publications about Islam, Sufism, and the activities of Shaikh Muhammad (Mehmet) Adil al Haqqani.

One indicator of subscribers' interest in community policy is the Engagement Rate. The obtained data indicate that the engagement rate by type of content is quite different. Thus, with an average engagement rate of 1.402% for the internet group Sufi.rb, the reaction to the photos was 11.7%, which indicates that most subscribers like to look at photos taken at events organized by community leaders.

In order to rank groups by total engagement, the resource popsters.ru was used to determine the level of average subscriber engagement per post. As a result, a fairly high level of average subscriber engagement for the post and a heightened interest in the content were established (Fig. 4).

To identify the most interesting posts for group members, ten posts with the highest engagement rate were selected.

The post entitled “Stone to Aldar Batyr! Burzyansky District” (ER 42.41%), dated 31 July 2022, reporting on the erection of the cenotaph in honour of Aldar Batyr (Burzyansky District, Republic of Bashkortostan) took the first place. Second place was

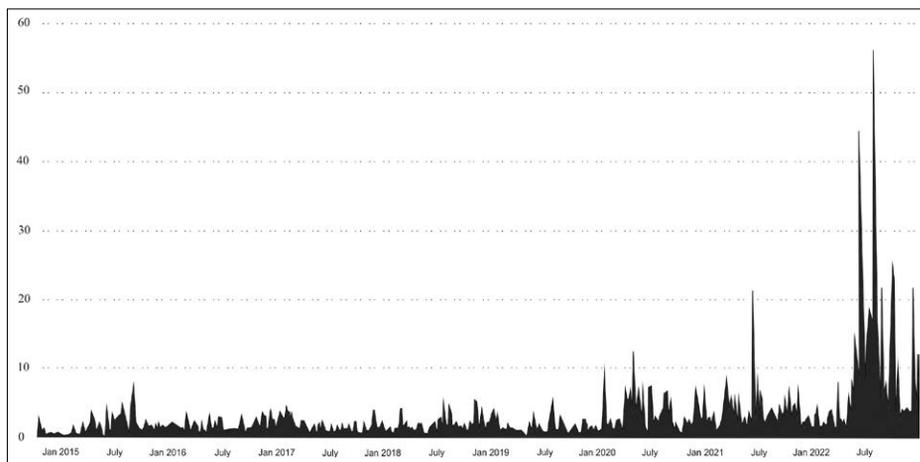


Figure 4: The coefficient of engagement per post by days from the date of creation of the community to 31. 12. 2022.

taken by the post “On 12th June a meeting of Muslims was held on Mount Narystau” (ER 23.18%) from 14 June 2022. The post provides information on an event held in Narystau, which brought together about 10,000 Muslims. The third most popular post was “Sheikh Usman S. Kildin – the representative of the Mawlana of Shaikh Mehmet an Naqshbandi ar Rabbani” (ER 20.83%) from 13 August 2022. The submitted post was accompanied by a photo of a document authorizing Shaikh Usman S. Kildin from Bashkortostan to be the murshid of the Naqshbandi Tariqah. The fourth most popular post, from 10 August 2022, was in the Bashkir language and reported on the opening of the Aldar Batyr memorial complex (ER 20.83%). Fifth place was taken by the post announcing the opening date of the Aldar Batyr memorial complex (ER 16.39%) from 04 August 2022.

## CONCLUSIONS

Years of research on the processes of sacralization of archaeological monuments conducted by the staff of the Department of Archaeological Heritage of the Southern Urals at the Institute of Ethnological Research, named after R.G. Kuzeev of the UFIC RAS, have led to the conclusion that a number of funerary objects, primarily located within the Bashkir Trans-Urals, are included in the modern cult and ritual practices of Muslims from different branches of Islam.

In the Southern Urals, one of the main models of sacralization of archaeological monuments is the traditional cult of the grave of a saint – awliya. It is closely related to both pre-Islamic religious beliefs and the cult of Ishans (leaders of Sufi tariqahs). In this cult, funeral and religious buildings are declared to be the burial places of saints.

The field research included occasional interviews with pilgrims and local clergy, but these meetings did not provide enough information to come up with a general description of the people who regularly participate in rituals organized at the burial sites of saints.

As the internet becomes increasingly globalized and social media platforms gain popularity, attracting wider audiences, we believe that netnography is one of the most promising avenues for learning more about pilgrims as a specific socio-cultural group. It involves applying various software and computer programs to analyse text information.

The data obtained through this method quite accurately determine the residence, gender, age and interests of people who regularly visit sacred archaeological sites. It also identifies the most active individuals and community leaders among members, as well as the level of involvement and interaction among community members. The data also enabled us to establish that a considerable number of people in the region participate in events at holy places, which are organized by representatives of the Naqshbandi Tariqah of Haqqani with the intention of mobilising their followers.

A slight predominance of women over men was found in the sex composition of the internet community members. This confirms the previously proposed thesis that middle-aged and older women living in rural areas are more likely to participate in the ritualistic practices at the graves of the awliya.

The analysis of the participants' interests and engagement with individual posts showed that they were particularly interested in Sufism and posts about the rituals of worship by Sufis at holy places, especially those held at Mount Narystau (Ilchigulovo IV medieval necropolis).

In the course of the analysis of the SufiRB internet community, it was also discovered that one of the most effective tools for studying the initiators of the process of sacralization of archaeological objects is to identify the most active members of online communities, the so-called leaders of the internet community. Further investigation of their personal pages revealed that they frequently organize trips to holy places and actively participate in establishing new places of worship.

Thus, the use of netnography methods has augmented the number of tools available for studying Muslim pilgrims who visit the sacred archaeological sites of the Republic of Bashkortostan.

The experience of studying the activities of religious internet communities, which demonstrate various flexible ways of building interaction between people and sacred objects of archaeological heritage, can contribute to the use of these sites in other areas of the socio-cultural environment, such as tourism, school and post-school education, the preservation of folk traditions and familiarization with the spiritual culture and worldview of ancestors.

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## КУЛЬТ СВЯТЫХ (АУЛИЯ) И ПАЛОМНИКИ В СОЦИАЛЬНЫХ СЕТЯХ (ПО МАТЕРИАЛАМ РЕСПУБЛИКИ БАШКОРТОСТАНА)

Айнур И. Тузбеков, Альберт Т. Ахатов



В статье анализируется малоизученная тема – инкорпорация традиционных суфийских практик, связанных с поклонением могилам святых Аулия (большая часть которых приурочена к сакрализованным памятникам археологии) в современную религиозную повседневность людей посредством Интернет коммуникаций.

Цель исследования – изучение паломников как особой социокультурной группы, представляющей собой с одной стороны «реальное» объединение людей – последователей Накшбандийского тариката коллективно посещающих сакральные места на Южном Урале, а с другой – виртуальное сообщество, способствующее построению новых форм передачи информации и интеграции отдельных ее акторов в религиозное Интернет-пространство.

В качестве объекта исследования выступила интернет-группа «Sufi RB», созданная и модерируемая последователями Накшбандийского тариката Хакканийи основными принципами объединения которого является единство территории проживания подписчиков (Республика Башкортостан) и интерес к суфизму и деятельности Шейха Мухаммад (Мехмет) Адила Хаккани аль-Кипруси.

Теоретическим основанием для изучения сообщества послужили онлайн-методы нетнографии (восходящей к этнографической науке). На основе анализа опубликованных материалов и активности аудитории сообщества был выявлен высокий интерес акторов к суфизму и массовым мероприятиям (до 10 тыс. чел) организуемых суфиями у святых мест и сакрализованных археологических объектов в Республике Башкортостан.

В ходе анализа полученных данных было определено, что собранные ранее во время экспедиционных выездов 2013–2018 гг. материалы коррелируются с результатами, полученными в «онлайн режиме». Так, было выявлено, что в целевой аудитории сообщества наблюдается небольшое преобладание женщин над мужчинами и людей старше 50 лет над всеми остальными возрастными категориями подписчиков. Большинство акторов группы кроме столицы региона живут в населенных пунктах, находящихся в южной и юго-восточной частях региона.

Авторы, анализируя паломников как социокультурную группу при помощи методики цифровой нетнографии, дополненной результатами полевых изысканий пришли к выводу о ее эффективности. Нарботанный религиозными интернет-сообществами опыт по построению организации взаимодействия людей и сакрализованных объектов археологического наследия, в интернет пространстве, можно использовать для развития туризма и т.д.

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Ainur Tuzbekov, Candidate of Historical Sciences, research fellow, Ufa Federal Research Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences, R.G. Kuzeev Institute for Ethnological Studies, K.Marx st, 6, Ufa, the Republic of Bashkortostan, Russia, 450077, [aituzbekov@gmail.com](mailto:aituzbekov@gmail.com)  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5895-9826>

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Albert Akhatov, Candidate of Historical Sciences, research fellow, Ufa Federal Research Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences, R.G. Kuzeev Institute for Ethnological Studies, K.Marx st, 6, Ufa, the Republic of Bashkortostan, Russia, 450077, [bertik@mail.ru](mailto:bertik@mail.ru)  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4776-9506>

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Айнур Тузбеков, Кандидат исторических наук, научный сотрудник, Институт этнологических исследований им. Р.Г. Кузеева – обособленное структурное подразделение Федерального государственного бюджетного научного учреждения Уфимского федерального исследовательского центра Российской академии наук ул. Карла Маркса, д. 6, г. Уфа, Республика Башкортостан, Россия, [aituzbekov@gmail.com](mailto:aituzbekov@gmail.com)

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Альберт Ахатов, Кандидат исторических наук, научный сотрудник, Институт этнологических исследований им. Р.Г. Кузеева – обособленное структурное подразделение Федерального государственного бюджетного научного учреждения Уфимского федерального исследовательского центра Российской академии наук ул. Карла Маркса, д. 6, г. Уфа, Республика Башкортостан, Россия, [bertik@mail.ru](mailto:bertik@mail.ru)