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CHAPTER 2.3

CELEBRATING MISS MUSLIM PAGEANTS AND OPPOSING ROCK CONCERTS: CONTRASTING THE RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY AND LEADERSHIP OF TWO MUSLIM WOMEN IN KAZAN

N. R. Micinski

Introduction

While Russia is not popularly known as a center for Islamic activity, Muslim civil society organizations in Kazan, Russia’s third largest city, have grown in strength and number since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Recently, Muslim women’s civil society organizations in Kazan have emerged as significant actors at the regional and national level.

Traditional understandings of Islamic authority have excluded women in many Muslim majority countries because religious authority was confined to *imāms* and *ʿulamāʾ* who received formal religious schooling in mosques and madrasahs. The situation in Tatarstan differs from other Muslim minority communities because Tatar Muslims are not a recent immigrant population. Tatars are a Turkic people, who emigrated from Siberia from the tenth to thirteenth century, and converted to Islam over 1,000 years ago.¹ Tatars are the largest ethnic minority in Russia with over five million people. In Tatarstan, 39 percent of the population is Russian and 53 percent is Tatar, numbering over two million.² Russians and Tatars have had a long period of engagement since the Russian Tsar Ivan the Terrible conquered Kazan in 1552. Muslim women in Tatarstan have been claiming religious authority for centuries by performing special cultural and religious rites through female religious figures called *abystay*. The most recent claim comes from women activists who are part of a growing

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women’s movement in Tatarstan that asserts Muslim women’s rights and defines how they want to be viewed by society.

In this chapter, I examine how experience as religious instructors in mosques equipped two Muslim women—Naila Ziganshina and Almira Adiatullina—to become prominent leaders and activists in Kazan, Russia. In the first section, I will lay out a theoretical framework for understanding Muslim women’s authority within invited and invented spaces. Second, I will place each case study within the historical and cultural context of Tatarstan and Russia at the beginning of the new millennium. Third, I will analyse the religious and social authority of Ziganshina and Adiatullina as two examples of Muslim women in positions of leadership in a Muslim minority country.

Building on interviews with Adiatullina and Ziganshina, I argue that Tatar Muslim women have asserted authority within the informal structures of civil society organizations and the formal structures of the Islamic Spiritual Boards. The authority and voices of women within the formal structure of the Spiritual Board have been limited to issues constructed as the Muslim women’s domain, such as wearing the headscarf or caring for children. In contrast, Muslim women within civil society organizations have asserted their authority on issues ranging from public drinking to rock concerts. While religious education and teaching experience are necessary credentials for Muslim women to become leaders and activists within the Muslim community in Russia, the type of impact Muslim women’s organizations have is largely dependent on the way they are created and where they draw their legitimacy.

Invited and Invented Spaces

Religious authority is an important lens for analysis because it examines how individuals and organizations construct and claim their right to speak for Islam. This becomes more complex when considering the interaction between religious authority and social authority, in respect to both men and women leaders within Muslim communities. Particularly in Kazan, formal religious education and experience as a mosque instructor built the social capital and legitimacy of Adiatullina and Ziganshina that later allowed them to act as social leaders for their communities on issues related to religion.

Throughout this chapter, I also use the analytic frameworks of formal and informal authority in order to highlight overlapping and
ambiguous cases that do not fit exclusively into the categories of formal and informal or religious and social authority. In addition, the lens of formal and informal authority is useful when applied to religious authority because it allows us to see the intersection of religious authority and state authority: both state and religious authorities negotiate mutually beneficial relationships that reinforce their legitimacy. These relationships extend beyond the state and religious institutions to social and community groups, developing further legitimacy for those involved.

The sharp lines drawn between formal and informal are contested by Miraftab, who asserts that informal politics should be conceptualized as invited and invented spaces, which overlap and interact with each other. Miraftab defines invited spaces as:

occupied by those grassroots actions and their allied non-governmental organizations that are legitimized by donors and government interventions. ‘Invented’ spaces are defined as occupied by those collective actions by the poor that directly confront the authorities and challenge the status quo.3

This distinction is significant because, at their heart, invited spaces “cope with systems of hardship” while invented spaces are defiant and “resist... the status quo.”4 The case studies used in this chapter show how invited spaces give immediate legitimacy while insuring loyalty and reciprocity. Invented spaces, however, build legitimacy over time through the growth of grassroots support but are not restricted by large institutions. Invented spaces often challenge tradition but, as I will discuss later, invented participation can also challenge progressive formal authorities to be more conservative.

Adiatullina and Ziganshina represent both invited and invented forms of women’s participation in Islamic governance in Tatarstan. Neither case is exclusively invited or invented, rather Muslim women define their power and participate in overlapping spheres, invited one day and invented the next. By using the invited/invented lens, I join Miraftab in challenging these dichotomies and critiquing the

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processes by which nation-states sanction which parts of civil society are ‘authentic’ by defining, inviting, and limiting participation.

Historical Context

Tatar National and Religious Identity

Throughout the five-hundred-year relationship between Russia and Tatarstan, Tatar independence movements have waxed and waned. The most recent surge came in March 1992 when the Tatarstan President Mintimer Shaimiev refused to sign the Federation Treaty, President Yeltsin’s attempt to unite the Russian Federation. With the collapse of the USSR, many people in Tatarstan began pushing for sovereignty by asserting a distinct Tatar national identity and calling for independence. This identity emphasized Tatars’ heritage as Turkic people who speak a different language, celebrate a distinct culture, and practice a separate religion. These efforts have shown themselves through establishing bilingual education, opening a second Tatar theater, and building mosques and madrasahs. After careful negotiation, President Shaimiev signed a bilateral treaty with Russia in 1994 that lay the basis for relative autonomy, which has allowed his administration to further establish Tatar national identity and institutions.

Key to Tatarstan’s recent nation-building project has been the Islamization of ‘Tatarness’ through the reconstruction of the Kul Sharif Mosque and the relatively fast pace of building Islamic schools, such as the Russian Islamic University. The reconstruction of the Kul Sharif Mosque in 1996 was seen by Tatars as a symbolic act of repossessing Kazan from Russian imperialists and physically changing Kazan’s skyline to include four prominent minarets. While the majority of Tatars remain secular, some scholars characterize current trends as an Islamic revival with nearly a quarter of young Tatars performing

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5 Goldberg provides a compelling and insightful case study of Tatar national identity about a 1917 Tatar play that was reproduced in 1992. See the fifth chapter of her dissertation: M. Goldberg, "Russian Empire—Tatar Theater: The Politics of Culture in Late Imperial Kazan" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2009), 91–116.
Islamic rites and almost 40 percent identifying with Islam without performing the rites.8 The Tatar government and Tatar Islamic authorities have created a dominant narrative in Tatarstan that placed Islam at the center of Tatar national identity.9

Islamic Authority in Russia

Islamic governance in Tatarstan has evolved since the Russian conquest in 1552 when Russian invaders attempted to force conversion, persecute believers, and dismantle Islamic institutions. Open hostility toward Muslims ended in 1788 when Catherine II permitted the creation of the first Muslim Spiritual Assembly in Ufa (also referred to as a muftīate). This new administrative body acted as a tool for state control and regulation of Muslim communities through the intermediaries of the Muslim religious elite. Following the 1917 revolution, the muftīate was retained and expanded to four muftīates in order to better control Soviet Muslim populations during World War II. The Soviet Union used Islamic governance to push propaganda from the atheist state and restrict the number of imāms and mosques in Muslim communities.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the muftīates were not dissolved, but multiplied with many new Islamic Spiritual Boards emerging across Russia.10 Such large expansion of Islamic governance was spearheaded by a new generation of leaders, sometimes called ‘young imāms,’ who had not been part of the Soviet muftīates or colluded with the KGB. The ‘young imāms’ contested the authority of the old muftīates, specifically the supremacy of the original muftīate in Ufa and its Muftī Talgat Tajutdinov. One group of ‘young imāms’ established a competing muftiāte based in Moscow called the Council of Muftis of Russia.11

The resulting power struggle between Muftī Talgat Tajutdinov and the ‘young imāms’ of Tatarstan has been intertwined with the

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geopolitics of the region. Since 1992, President Shaimiev has pushed for the separation of Tatar Islamic governance from all federal Islamic governance (particularly Tajutdinov’s muftīate). Shaimiev’s politics coincide with his negotiations for Tatar independence and the separation of Tatar Islamic governance was an initial step toward overall Tatar sovereignty.¹²

The structure of Islamic governance in Tatarstan between 1992 and 1998 consisted of two competing parallel spiritual boards: one loyal to Muftī Tajutdinov based in Ufa and the other loyal to the Council of Muftīs of Russia based in Moscow. Local mosques were registered with one or both of the spiritual boards. This created confusion at the local level for rural imāms not involved in the regional power struggle.

In 1998, President Shaimiev and the Tatar government organized a Unifying Islamic Congress and elected Gusman Iskhakov as Muftī of Tatarstan. The formation and establishment of the Muslim Religious Board of the Republic of Tatarstan (MRBRT) and Iskhakov’s authority is closely linked to the power and authority of Shaimiev and the Tatarstan government.¹³

The current Islamic governance in Tatarstan consists of the MRBRT, which is subordinate to the Council of Muftīs of Russia. This Spiritual Board, discussed later in this chapter, is based in Kazan and led by Iskhakov. The Spiritual Board employs the muftī, qādi, imāms, and administrators as well as organizing work in mosques and madrasahs throughout Tatarstan.

**Women’s Islamic Authority in Tatarstan**

The MRBRT has never formally included women within Islamic governance in Tatarstan. Until 2005, the Spiritual Board did not plan or organize events for women. Historically, Tatar Muslim women participated in Islam in informal ways, such as the position of abystay. Literally meaning ‘older sister,’ abystay describes a “female religious figure or a mullah’s wife, who would give religious instruction to girls.”¹⁴ During interviews in Tatarstan, many people were confused about what qualifies a woman to become an abystay: some suggested

¹⁴ Yemelianova, *Russia and Islam*, xvi.
**abystay** had to be the wife of a *mullâ*, while others thought old age and experience would be enough.\textsuperscript{15}

*Abystay* are similar to *otin-oyi* in other parts of Central Asian such as Uzbekistan or western China.\textsuperscript{16} *Abystay* taught in the women’s maktab in a similar way to the Central Asian *otin-oyi*. Moreover, like the *otin-oyi*, before the 1917 Revolution, the *abystay* were learned women from wealthy milieus who educated children and also conducted rituals among women.\textsuperscript{17}

Additionally, Tatar women hold special pride that *abystay* are allowed only in Tatarstan to read an important prayer to begin their national festival.

Below are two case studies based on fieldwork conducted in Kazan, Tatarstan, in July 2007 and June 2009, to explore the changing nature of Muslim women’s authority in Islamic governance in Tatarstan. The case studies are a compilation of interviews with Ziganshina or Adiatullina and other members of the Muslim community in Kazan. All quotes cited in the text are from my personal interviews with Ziganshina or Adiatullina unless otherwise stated. There were many barriers during our interviews, including communication through a translator, limited amounts of time, and lack of trust in part because of my identity as a white American male researcher.

**Naila Ziganshina and Union of Muslim Women of Tatarstan**

Naila Ziganshina is a thirty-nine-year-old Tatar Muslim woman—mother of two children, wife, and leader of Union of Muslim Women of Tatarstan. When I first met Ziganshina in 2007, she was dressed conservatively—covering her head, wrists, and ankles—but wearing a fashionable silk tunic and matching hijab. I was not surprised to later discover her passion for Islamic fashion and the Miss Muslim Pageant that her organization started.

\textsuperscript{15} Interviews by author, Kazan, Russia, June 2009.


The Union of Muslim Women of Tatarstan is an association of Muslim women’s clubs, which works to improve Muslim women’s lives in Tatarstan. Much of their work occurs on a grassroots level by volunteering in the community with youth or responding to the needs of individual families, but their work reaches the international community through the Miss Muslim Pageant. In the four years following the organization’s founding, Ziganshina has emerged as a leading figure for Muslim women in Tatarstan.

Creating Space: Invited Participation

In 2005, an organizing committee of imāms headed by Dr. Valiulla Yakupov, Deputy of Muftī of the MRBRT, arranged the first meeting of the union and found an appropriate leader. The organizing committee was started after Yakupov noticed the prevalence of women’s clubs around Tatarstan within local mosques and saw a need to connect their work. Yakupov explained that

After the [era of Soviet] Atheism, the majority of people attending mosques were women and continue to be today…[the union was established] as centralized support [for the local women’s clubs].

On December 5, 2005, representatives from forty-eight local women’s clubs gathered to establish the union. The attendees voted for a republic-wide structure and chose Naila Ziganshina as the first leader of the group. Following the meeting, a constitution was written and filed with the Tatarstan Ministry of Justice by a male lawyer from the Spiritual Board. The union is registered as a social organization because the purpose of the group is to improve the lives of Muslim women in Tatarstan, not work in a religious function. The collaboration between the two groups blurs the legal line: Ziganshina is a salaried employee of the Spiritual Board, has an office on the second floor of the Spiritual Board’s building, and participates in other activities within the Spiritual Board. Additionally, the Spiritual Board holds the union’s finances and both organizations have received money from the Fund of Support for Islamic Science and Education based in Moscow. On paper, Ziganshina represents herself as a social leader within a religious community. In practice, Ziganshina operates as a religious leader by

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18 Valiulla Yakupov, interview with author, June 2009.
providing one-to-one counseling and religious advice to women and writing and delivering radio addresses about Islam to the public.

The MRBRT, while legally separate from the union, in reality controls both its physical and financial resources. The union operates within an invited space for women’s participation. The Spiritual Board carefully selected Ziganshina as the ideal women to lead and represent Muslim women of Tatarstan. Ziganshina claimed that the Spiritual Board searched for over four years for the ideal women to be the leader of the union but “they could not find the right women who could deal with issues of family, social, and education.” Ziganshina was invited by the Mufti of the MRBRT to organize halāl food for the mosque’s kindergarten classes and work on several charity projects. After volunteering at the Spiritual Board, she was recruited (and later elected) to be the leader of the union.

As with other invited spaces, the union’s mission came with limitations. While the office building of the MRBRT is not segregated by gender, the Spiritual Board limited women’s full participation in the wider organization by creating a separate organization for women, restricting their voice and authority to issues directly related to women, family, and children. The Spiritual Board designated the purpose of the union, selected their leader, and provides and controls their resources. The legitimacy of Ziganshina and the union comes from the Spiritual Board’s close association. Most overtly, the organizing committee set the terms for legitimate participation of women through the representative of the union, Ziganshina, to the Spiritual Board.

Basis of Authority

Ziganshina’s religious authority in her community ranges from explaining passages of the Qurʾān to playing matchmaker for young Muslim men and women. For many years, Ziganshina taught Qurʾān lessons for women at the mosque and, in 2009, produced a weekly radio show during which she gave speeches on various religious topics. Ziganshina explained, “God has given me this authority.” The basis of her authority and power is rooted in three points: her formal religious education and experience as an instructor in the mosque, her personal accomplishments and charisma, and her position as an employee within the formal institution of the Spiritual Board.
Authority from Religious Education

Ziganshina attended madrasah in Kazan, Tatarstan, where she studied the Qur’ān, Islamic law, and Arabic language for two years. After studying journalism at university, she began teaching in her local mosque. Ziganshina taught lessons on Islam and Tatar and Russian language for other women and children. It is from her formal religious education that Ziganshina draws her knowledge of the Qur’ān, hadīth, and Islamic law. She emphasizes her religious education as a foundation of her religious authority. Ziganshina explained that just as “it is hard to work in law if you do not know the law,” so she must be knowledgeable about Islam in order to teach.

Ziganshina stopped teaching while her children were young, but after they had grown up, she wanted to do more for her community. Ziganshina grew frustrated because no one took her seriously and instead saw her as just another mother. She began to volunteer with the Spiritual Board and eventually became the leader of the union. Ziganshina used her religious education and experience as a mosque instructor as a stepping-stone to greater leadership within the community. Without her religious education, the Spiritual Board would not have considered her qualified for her position. Her teaching experience has played a factor in her rise to power because it demonstrated her ability to work directly with women and children.

When I asked Ziganshina if she considered herself an abystay, she chuckled, responding that maybe someday she would be considered an abystay, but she was not an old women yet. While religious education is an important factor for younger women to claim religious authority in Tatarstan, older women who are considered abystay are respected for their religious knowledge without formal education.

Reputation from Personal Accomplishments and Charisma

Ziganshina’s personal accomplishments have built her reputation as a strong leader and virtuous Tatar Muslim woman. As a journalist, Ziganshina’s newspaper articles were popular across the republic. During the 1980s—while Islam was still officially banned—Ziganshina produced several television programs on Tatar religion and culture. In 1989, Ziganshina started an organization for youth to discuss their problems in the Madovia republic (east of Tatarstan) where she was living at the time. Because most of the participants were Muslim, they would hold their meetings during the week and on Friday gather for
prayer in the same space. During this time, mosques were banned and most had been destroyed. Ziganshina gathered support and wrote a letter to the president of the republic asking for permission to build the mosque, which was later granted.

Ziganshina’s experience of fighting for one of the first legal mosques in Russia is representative of other Muslim women leading in the rebuilding of their religious communities. Ziganshina explained that “Because there are not many active men, women must organize to build mosques.” This void in leadership presented an opportunity for Ziganshina and other women like her to take up religious leadership within their communities.

In her public role, Ziganshina emphasizes the characteristics that exemplify virtuous Tatar Muslim women. She gushes about choosing to be a good wife and mother over her career in journalism; she volunteers regularly at her mosque and in community; she dresses conservatively wearing a headscarf and always covers her wrists and ankles. Ziganshina could lose some of her authority if she did not choose to personally fulfill a conservative conception of female piety.

**Formal Legitimacy from the MRBRT**

Ziganshina’s authority is also based on her employment at the Spiritual Board, whose own legitimacy comes from its formal relationship with the Russian and Tatar governments. The Spiritual Board’s organizing committee selected Ziganshina after she met their criteria and completed volunteer work in the mosque. Ziganshina is seen as a formal representative of Muslim women in Tatarstan and thus a legitimate leader within the community.

Before Ziganshina was employed, there were no women in positions of authority within the MRBRT. Ziganshina filled a void at the top level of leadership for women, providing a voice and representation as a social leader of Muslim women at the regional level. While Ziganshina’s role is officially administrative, her activities are often in the realm of religious leadership. Women’s participation in other parts of the Spiritual Board is in a service capacity, such as secretaries, cooks, and cleaners. Ziganshina is the only women employed at the Spiritual Board with substantial authority or input into the management of the organization; however, the union is not seen as threatening to the Spiritual Board’s authority because it was invited to participate in sanctioned and limited ways.
Limitations of Religious Authority

The limits of Ziganshina’s authority are threefold: the structural limitations set up by the Spiritual Board and the union’s constitution, the personal limitation of authority based on her knowledge of Islam, and the cultural limits of traditional Tatar society. Ziganshina claimed that she never steps outside the limits set up by the union’s constitution, which she explained as not challenging the Tatar state and not supporting radical extremists. Outside of these restrictions, she claimed that nothing was off-limits. Another male official at the Spiritual Board said that Ziganshina could achieve any position within the Spiritual Board except an imām.

Ziganshina later went on to explain the personal limitations she puts on her own authority based on her knowledge of Islam. When Ziganshina gives a speech or teaches a lesson, she does not necessarily quote from the Qurʾān but tries to explain it in her own way. Ziganshina explained that “the idea must be the same but it is in my own words…Imāms and Hazrats [honored judges] judge the global problems connected to politics but simple problems like divorces or someone needing money—they come to me and my organization to solve these problems.” In her understanding, larger political issues are handled by male religious authorities, while Ziganshina and her all-women organization are responsible for the personal interpretation of religion affecting the daily lives of Muslims in Tatarstan. Ziganshina explained these limitations in terms of the limits of her own knowledge:

I always give answers by myself because I know the rules and the answers from my religious education. I use the Qurʾān and the sunnah to answer their questions and if that is not enough, I ask the qādī.

Although Ziganshina has the authority to answer these questions, she may not have the specific knowledge or expertise on a subject. Male religious authorities, in Ziganshina’s eyes, are considered higher religious authorities with overriding power; Ziganshina suggested: “I am just the helper of the imāms.”

Some people in the Muslim community in Kazan question Muslim women’s religious authority to teach or instruct men and boys. Ziganshina rejects this assertion, saying,

I have asked the imām if I am allowed to give a speech about morality and Islam to men and [the imām] said, “Yes, if you speak about morality, mercy, and Islam.”
While Ziganshina defends her claim to religious authority, she supports her claim using the opinion of male religious authorities. Ziganshina’s religious authority is defined and patrolled by male religious authorities within the Spiritual Board and their superiority is reinforced by Ziganshina when she defers to the opinions of male religious authorities.

Several men within the community suggested that women should only exercise leadership with respect to women’s issues but Ziganshina firmly asserts that she has the authority to teach on all subjects to women and children, including both boys and girls. She also reaches adult male audiences through public speeches and radio programs. Ziganshina ended with a challenge for male leaders to help the women in their community:

If [a man] does not believe a woman should be a leader, then he should be a leader himself [and help the women]…The Qur’ān does not ban women from leadership positions.

While this assertion suggests that women’s leadership in Tatarstan is simply a pragmatic measure, it is especially poignant in central Russia, where the majority of attendants at mosque are women and some of the mosques in Russia have been rebuilt because of the leadership of women.

Celebrating Miss Muslim Pageants

The main impact of Ziganshina’s work has been through the union’s annual Miss Muslim Pageant. Begun in 2006, the Miss Muslim Pageant aims to encourage more women to wear a headscarf and to construct an alternative image of beauty for Muslim women. The head of the jury deciding the pageant said,

They see their Muslim peers who wear hijāb as beautiful, well-educated and religious…We want to show that beauty has nothing to do with nudity and obscenity.\(^\text{19}\)

The Union of Muslim Women of Tatarstan uses the Miss Muslim Pageant to celebrate and encourage Muslim fashion and beauty in a non-confrontational way within informal politics.

Over fifty young women participated the first year in a range of activities including cooking and sewing competitions, Qur’ān memorization and recitation tests, and questions on Tatar history and culture. In the following years, additional competitions were added such as flower arrangement, modeling Tatar national dress, writing and performing a lullaby, and racing for the fastest to put on a headscarf, and fastest to put on a baby’s diaper. Miss Muslim 2008 explained:

This contest is to show society that Muslim women are not obedient. We don’t sit at home all day. We can do all of this stuff.\(^\text{20}\)

While Miss Muslim 2008 suggested that the contest presents Muslim women working for society, at the same time the pageant reinforces traditional Tatar and Muslim gender roles. Young Muslim women are judged on the extent to which their personal religious piety matches that of an ideal Muslim woman.

The Miss Muslim Pageant takes the Western idea of beauty pageants and attempts to invert its purpose. While the pageant reinforces Muslim values and denounces scantily clad women, it does so by constructing and celebrating a particular ideal of Muslim womanhood. The Union of Muslim Women of Tatarstan covertly asserts its religious authority by interpreting its ideal of Muslim womanhood and constructing this ideal through the competitions and judging criteria of the pageant. The organization’s understanding of Muslim womanhood does not stray far from conservative ideals; rather the pageant pushes back against non-religious Russian society to assert alternative images of beauty. Ziganshina and the union have overlapping sources of their authority and tools of power: Ziganshina has the formal authority associated with the Spiritual Board, but can use the informal tools associated with the pageant to influence society without issuing a formal ruling.

In my interview with Miss Muslim 2008, she concluded that “Of course Muslim women want to be beautiful but by showing off [their] personality”\(^\text{21}\)—and, I would add, one’s piety.

\(^{20}\) Gulina, interview by author, June 2009.

\(^{21}\) Gulina, interview by author, June 2009.
Almira Adiatullina and Social Organization of Muslim Women of Tatarstan

Almira Adiatullina is a seventy-year-old Tatar Muslim woman—former journalist during the Afghan war, community leader, and the founder of the Social Organization of Muslim Women of Tatarstan. Before my first visit to Kazan, I had read about Adiatullina and her organization in BBC news articles.

The Social Organization of Muslim Women of Tatarstan is a group of Muslim women in Kazan working with the goal of raising the spiritual level of Tatar people. Adiatullina initiated a campaign for Muslim women’s right to wear a headscarf in national ID photos, which grew into a nationwide movement taking their case to the Supreme Court of Russia. Through this campaign, Adiatullina and her organization have become well known throughout Tatarstan and Russia. One interviewee described her as the most famous Muslim woman in Russia; another person said, “She is like our Mother Teresa.”

Creating Space: Invented Participation

The Social Organization of Muslim Women of Tatarstan was founded after Adiatullina went on hajj and experienced a life-changing revelation. When she returned from hajj she explained, “I understood that I lacked some knowledge about Islam, that is why I entered Muhammadiya”—a historic Islamic university in Kazan—at the age of fifty-nine. During the mid-1990s, many people were organizing professional unions for lawyers and doctors and Adiatullina explained, “I began to think why should not we Muslim women unite?”

On November 25, 1995, women from her university and a women’s study group situated in a mosque founded what was then called the Union of Muslim Women of Tatarstan. Adiatullina explained that, “there was not an election…I organized it, so I am the leader.” At the group’s founding, the MRBRT was supportive and encouraged their work but, in 2005, when the Spiritual Board started its own women’s group, they stopped working closely together. Because the

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22 Interview by author, July 2007.
23 Muhammadiya is a historical madrasah associated with Jadidism that was founded in 1881 by Galimzhan Barudi, a famous Tatar theologian and leader.

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new women’s organization was associated with the Spiritual Board, it became known as the Union of Muslim Women of Tatarstan and Adiatullina’s organization was forced to change its name to the Social Organization of Muslim Women of Tatarstan.

Adiatullina’s organization was started as an invented, rather than invited, form of participation. Adiatullina identified a need in her community and gathered people and resources while working outside the formal structure of the MRBRT. Although the Spiritual Board was sympathetic to the organization, they never formally supported her. The two women’s groups organize around similar goals, but compete for membership and resources. Both organizations offer competing claims of being the legitimate representatives of Muslim women in Tatarstan.

In contrast to the Union of Muslim Women of Tatarstan, Adiatullina’s organization has often confronted authorities, both government and religious, by challenging the status quo. One of the ways in which the organization has invented new participation is through publishing a newsletter called *Muslima* (Muslim woman) that highlights events and issues in the Muslim community in Tatarstan for a female readership. Adiatullina is the editor-in-chief, authoring most of the articles and appearing in almost every photo within the newsletter. While seeming to be Adiatullina’s bully pulpit, the newsletter was the first publication in Tatarstan addressing women’s issues and targeted at Muslim women. Adiatullina works closely with a younger woman, a sociologist, who contributes to the leadership of the organization. Beyond the leadership, the organization draws about sixty women at each meeting.

The campaign to wear headscarves in national ID photos emerged in May 2002 when several members were denied government IDs because they refused to remove their headscarves for pictures. The organization made numerous appeals to the government to allow Muslim women to be photographed in their headscarves. Judicial hearings were held at both the Supreme Court of Tatarstan and a federal court of Russia but both appeals were denied. After one negative ruling against their case, women from the organization promised to appeal to the Russian Parliament and the European Court of Human Rights. Adiatullina

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personally wrote to the President of Tatarstan and the Mayor of Kazan to have her voice heard. Adiatullina used spaces not traditionally led by women, especially women with a dissenting opinion, such as collecting signatures for petitions and reading letters with demands in the mosque. On May 15, 2003, the Supreme Court of Russia issued a ruling allowing Muslim women to be photographed in headscarves based on the Russian constitution’s right to religious liberty. Adiatullina and her organization police the passport officials’ actions by supporting Muslim women who are denied their rights and enforcing the court’s ruling. This role was not invited or appointed. Adiatullina invented and defined the position for herself and in the process claimed leadership within the Muslim community where little previously existed for Muslim women in Tatarstan.

Basis of Authority

Adiatullina’s religious authority is transmitted in her roles as a teacher in the mosque, as a judge and organizer of an annual Qur’ân recitation contest, and as editor-in-chief of Muslima. Within each issue of the newsletter, Adiatullina uses her editorial authority to campaign against what she defines as immoral, including public drinking, advertisements with nude women, and, most recently, a rock concert. Adiatullina explained her belief that, “God created me so that I could explain to people that we must fight for beauty and purity.” The basis for Adiatullina’s authority is rooted in three areas, including her religious education and teaching experience, her personal reputation and charisma, and her claim to represent the Tatar people and ancestry.

Authority from Religious Education

Adiatullina’s advanced religious education began after she went on hajj in 1993 and enrolled at Muhammadiya in 1997. Adiatullina is respected for completing hajj because most Muslims in Kazan have not or are not able to go, due to past visa restrictions by the Soviet government, and the fact that hajj is prohibitively expensive for most Muslims in Russia today without funding from foreign sponsors. In addition, Adiatullina retells her experiences in mystical language about how her soul united with her fellow pilgrims and how God spoke directly to her. These claims of mystical experiences and direct communication from God cement Adiatullina’s credibility within her religious community.

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The religious education from Muhammadiya equipped her with a more detailed knowledge of Islam that enabled her to teach in mosques, but Adiatullina had higher aims. She explained,

Yes, I studied in university. I can do more than this. I ask all the mosques to bring up our children. I think I can do more for Muslims in Tatarstan [than teach in the mosque].

While it was important for Adiatullina to first teach in the mosque, she was seeking to have a wider impact on her community. Adiatullina used her religious education and teaching experience to advance to regional and national leadership.

Reputation from Personal Accomplishments and Charisma
Adiatullina emphasized that her personal accomplishments have built her legitimacy within her community in Tatarstan. Adiatullina was also a journalist by trade, covering the Great Patriotic War and traveling to Afghanistan in the 1980s to write dispatches from the warzone. Adiatullina claimed:

That’s why people knew that I’m a leader…everyone knows me. All the streets know me. All the markets know me…because I’m a fighter.

While not literally a soldier, Adiatullina’s commanding presence, assertive personality, and strong communication skills have helped her fight for Muslim women’s rights in Russia.

While Adiatullina does not claim to be a religious scholar, she does act with religious authority. She explained that “I have very little knowledge compared to scientists but I know the problem and I write about it.” Adiatullina’s legitimacy comes from first-hand knowledge about a problem and writing and speaking convincingly about the issue, aided by her charisma and journalistic skills.

Adiatullina’s influence was broadened as the issue with the headscarves caught the attention of national and international press. Others in the community said, after Adiatullina was interviewed by numerous newspapers, that “journalists talk with her because they like what she says.”25 It is true that Adiatullina’s identity fulfills what many in the press want to hear: she is a feisty elderly Muslim woman wearing a headscarf demanding Muslim women’s rights. This image, paired with statements like “Until I am arrested, I will continue…” have made

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Informal Legitimacy from the Tatar People and Ancestry

Part of Adiatullina’s claim for authority is her connection to the general public of Tatarstan and her attempt to position herself closer to Tatar ancestors. Adiatullina repeatedly stressed her connection with the general populace, stating, “I couldn’t work for just a few privileged people… I work, not for myself, but for all the people of Tatarstan.” By putting herself in opposition to “a few privileged people,” Adiatullina claims to be closer with the people of Tatarstan than those in power, like the MRBRT or the Union of Muslim Women of Tatarstan. Adiatullina has established grassroots appeal in order to compensate for lack of formal power and status within the Spiritual Board.

In claiming religious authority, Adiatullina connected God and her personal knowledge of history, stating: “God gives me my authority. He speaks to me… because of my experience—I know history.” Adiatullina’s emphasis on Tatar history positions her as a more legitimate representative of Tatar people than others. Adiatullina stresses her personal knowledge of Tatar history, which is aided by her age. In contrast to Soviet times when Muslim women were encouraged to publicly take off their headscarves and burn them, Adiatullina makes a pointed statement by wearing her headscarf and encouraging other Muslim women to do the same.26 Adiatullina’s simple, conservative dress stands in contrast to Ziganshina’s fashion-conscious outfits and stylish headscarves.

Limitations of Religious Authority

Although Adiatullina asserts that her authority is not limited, Adiatullina is most confined by the informal nature of her organization. While the organization has a strong national reputation because of the court cases concerning the headscarves, it has not built up a formal membership or organizational structure. When Adiatullina writes a letter to the mayor or pens an article for the newsletter, she is speaking only for herself. She is not an elected representative of the group and does not hold any formal power within the Spiritual Board. Each

campaign requires gathering new support by collecting signatures for a petition. Once she has collected a significant number of signatures, Adiatullina’s stature in the community is greater, but each campaign requires a new referendum on her authority.

Part of Adiatullina’s success is based on her claim that there are no limits to her authority. Because she did not acknowledge constraints, she was able to create a new organization and invent a new form of women’s participation in her community. Because she did not believe her voice should be limited, she was willing to confront the leadership of the Spiritual Board, the Tatarstan government, and the Russian government.

Adiatullina, in contrast to Ziganshina, does not use male religious authority to defend her leadership, rather she said, “OK, then the men should solve this issue... Where are the Muftis? They are all sleeping.” Typical to Adiatullina’s personality, she used her charisma to make a scathing critique of male religious authorities.

**Opposing Immoral Rock Concerts**

The impact of the Social Organization of Muslim Women of Tatarstan has been achieved mostly through campaigns against specific social issues that Adiatullina and others have deemed immoral or un-Islamic. Each campaign focuses on the spiritual purity of the people of Tatarstan and prescribes more conservative, religious behavior in its place. These campaigns have taken the form of petitions, community meetings in mosques, articles in newspapers, letters to the Mayor of Kazan and the President of Tatarstan, formal court cases, and participating in the actual destruction of ‘immoral’ objects. The organization’s campaigns have been successful at ‘purifying’ and ‘protecting’ the public space surrounding mosques in Kazan, particularly the Kul Sharif Mosque.27

Following the headscarf campaign, Adiatullina began a campaign to tear down billboard advertisements with pictures of nude women that were located near the Kul Sharif Mosque. The organization also arranged protests asking that “advertising [boards] displaying naked

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27 The Kul Sharif mosque was rebuilt in 1996 and was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2000. Both Tatar government and their people take great pride in the mosque’s history and restored beauty.
female flesh be removed off the streets.” Adiatullina commented, “It was a humiliation to the women of the city. We wrote a letter to the mayor and asked for the ads to be taken down.” Eventually, over seventy advertisements were removed. Another campaign aimed to stop a beer festival that was to be held next to Kul Sharif and to tear down a pub situated nearby. After organizing a petition with over 1,600 signatures, Adiatullina convinced the Mayor of Kazan to call off the beer festival and shut down the pub. When I spoke with Adiatullina, she proudly showed a photograph of her standing over the rubble of the demolished pub with a shovel in hand.

Most recently, Adiatullina has begun to campaign to prevent any future rock concerts being held next to the Kul Sharif Mosque. On August 25, 2008, the Creation of Peace Festival held a rock concert near the mosque with musicians from around the world, bringing together different religions and cultures to celebrate and encourage peace. Kazan was chosen for the festival because Muslims and Orthodox Russians live together peacefully, and Kazan’s Kremlin contains both the Annunciation Cathedral and the Kul Sharif Mosque. Because of this symbolic unity, the festival selected Kazan and the Kremlin for the site of the concert.

On the night of the concert, Adiatullina was returning from town when she passed the Kremlin and could not hear the call to prayer from the mosque. Adiatullina wrote another letter to the President of Tatarstan asking him to not allow the concert to be near Kul Sharif. She explained, “We asked them to do it some other place. We should not laugh at our history and our people. The founders of Kazan died on this place.” Adiatullina is opposed to the concert because the noise disrespects Tatar history and disrupts the public’s ability to hear the call to prayer. Adiatullina asserted her authority by presenting herself as interested in preserving Tatar history and respecting past generations.

In May 2009, over one hundred people gathered with Adiatullina to sign another letter to the President requesting the concert not be stopped but be moved to another location away from the mosque. Adiatullina explained:

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This is not a radical stance. We are not going to the extremes. We just want to [conduct ourselves] in a civilized manner…. People’s bones are buried there. This could lead to a tragedy because of their souls.

Adiatullina repeatedly stressed her concern for Tatar history and ancestors as signifiers of her authority.

In opposing the rock concert, Adiatullina is challenging the religious authority of the Mufti of the Kul Sharif Mosque, because he gave permission the previous year for the rock concert to take place near the mosque. Adiatullina’s challenge to the Mufti’s religious authority comes as a plea for respect for Tatar history and ancestors, not as a religious disagreement. This distinction does not negate that Adiatullina, the leader of an informal Muslim women’s organization, is challenging the decision made by one of the highest muftis in Kazan. Adiatullina is operating in invented space through which she is using collective action to challenge the status quo of the Spiritual Board.

Conclusion

Communal accounts of the Muslim women’s movement in Tatarstan have fallen into two narratives—one in which the Spiritual Board responded to the demand from women in Tatarstan to have more say in an organization that represents them and another narrative which sees their women’s movement being co-opted by the traditional institutions of power and limited to superficial issues, such as fashion and beauty contests. While these two narratives appear oppositional, the resulting women’s organizations provide an insightful comparison regarding the abilities and constraints of operating within invited and invented spaces.

Both organizations were responding to the same need in their community (women’s participation in Islamic governance), but were created in different ways. Both women used their religious education and experience as mosque instructors as stepping-stones to greater leadership and activism within their community. While their religious education was a necessary credential to be able to operate in higher religious circles, it was not their only basis for religious authority and legitimacy.

Ziganshina’s impact was accomplished through celebrating Muslim women’s beauty, while Adiatullina’s impact was through opposing what she deemed ‘un-Islamic.’ Both women’s positions of authority enabled
and constrained their contributions to a discussion about what is or is not Islamic. Ziganshina was constrained because she could not act in opposition to the policies of her employer, the Spiritual Board; Adiatullina was constrained because she did not have the formal support of the Spiritual Board to provide her legitimacy. Adiatullina was enabled to act because she had the freedom to challenge policies through her invented space and was unconstrained by formal politics of the Spiritual Board; Ziganshina was enabled to act because she had financial and physical support, as well as formal legitimacy, from the Spiritual Board. Invented spaces can circumvent or challenge older formal institutions by creating new forms of authority or new forms of participation. Invented spaces often afford the luxury of being able to oppose rather than propose policies but do not come with the financial or physical support of invited spaces.

The lives of Ziganshina and Adiatullina show the complicated relationship between the invention of new participation, their multiple bases of authority, and the impact they have on their community and their nation. While religious education and teaching experience are necessary credentials for Muslim women to become leaders and activists within the Muslim community, the type of impact Muslim women’s organizations have is largely dependent on the way it is created and where it draws its legitimacy. Rather than Muslim women being portrayed as passive recipients of religion, Ziganshina and Adiatullina are two Muslim women who are actively shaping and defining their community through different forms of authority and participation.

**Bibliography**


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