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Religious Conversion, Utopia and Sacred Space (Okunevo Village in Western Siberia)

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This paper represents an attempt at theorizing a “sacred space” that coalesced in the last two decades in association with the village of Okunevo in Western Siberia. Using discourse analysis and the ideas of social constructivism, the authors highlight some contemporary narratives related to Okunevo. They view this “site of power” as a social product and a result of the interplay of mythological narrative, archaeological interpretation, and tourist practices. The production of myths and “invented traditions” are vital ways in which non-traditional religious communities in Okunevo remember, reactualize and articulate their religious identity. The highlighted discourses, which illustrate the social logic of the development of “sites of power” and methods of representing them, allow us to analyze this “sacred space” from a historical perspective.

Keywords: new sacred space, non-traditional religions, mythology, archeological heritage, Okunevo, Omsk region.

Introduction

THE process of religious rebirth that is unfolding in front of our eyes is leading to the appearance of “sacred sites,” sacred spaces, and the invention of new traditions. Such spaces are anthropologically important, with their own particular atmosphere and aura, the significance of which cannot ultimately be turned into goods or made an instrument of power. They are the result of the joint actions of various actors: people, rules of behavior, and artifacts (Chidester and Linenthal 1995: 439–40; Kärrholm 2007: 439–40; Kong 2006: 903–18; Sheldrake 2007: 243–58). We can say that sacred space constitutes a certain quality that is actively constructed by various actors

(scholars, devotees, government workers, esoteric practitioners, producers of mass media) in contemporary postmodern culture (Tong and Kong 2000: 29–45).

The subject of this study is such a “sacral space,” a unique local center of religious activity with its own styles of behavior and sensibility, which developed in the course of the last twenty years in the village of Okunevo in the Muromtsevsk Region of Omsk Oblast. The popularity of this place grew beyond its region many years ago, and methods of contemporary narrativization (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2003: 16–17) of the “Okunevo phenomenon” are distinctive for their variety: this village is characterized as a “site of power,” as “the Bellybutton of the World,” and as “an ark,” as a place of restorative camps, and as “the Land of Five Lakes,” as well as a tourist attraction with an endless flow of eager visitors. In the words of Doreen Massey, here we have “a multitude of stories with a spatial character” (Massey 2000: 231), which makes this western Siberian village a very attractive topic for scholarly analysis.

We cannot currently say that this new sacral complex in Western Siberia has received comprehensive treatment from researchers. The existing literature on the “Okunevo phenomenon” can be divided into three categories: studies written by archaeologists and other researchers who have approached this place as an archeological object of study (Matiushchenko 1997: 85–87; Matiushchenko 2003; Matiushchenko and Plevodov 1994); a few anthropological studies (Seleznev 2014: 41–59; Selezneva 2014: 59–73); and studies that are parascientific in nature (Rechkin 2011).

An analysis of the scholarly material shows that the problem of the evolution of an Okunevo sacral universe, as well as the presence there of various discourses and practices that variously describe this new “site of power” are the most relevant, and unresearched. This circumstance has determined the basic idea and content of the current article.

The following analysis is based on data obtained in the course of field trips to the village of Okunevo in the Muromtsevsk Region of Omsk Oblast in 2006 and 2013. We analyze several unstructured interviews, and our methodology includes engaged observation and photo fixation. Our informants were for the most part young and middle-aged people who were residents and visitors of the village of Okunevo (in our personal archives we designate them as Pavel, Dmitry, Sergey and Stas). The materials for this article also include data from the analysis of internet fora that focus on the village of Okunevo.

We use Michel Foucault’s theory of discourse analysis and Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman’s theories of social constructivism (1995) as the the-

oretical foundations for our research. On the one hand, discourses serve as the logical points of departure for the development of sacred spaces, and, on the other, they are forms of their representation. The interrelationship of discourses creates a complex semantic content for individual spaces (Eade and Sallnow 1991; Dora 2011: 163–84). On the basis of these theoretical ideas we highlight some contemporary narratives that are connected to the village of Okunevo. We examine this “site of power” as a social product and as the interaction of mythology, archaeological interpretation of the site and its religious and tourism practices.

Okunevo: The “Invention of a Tradition”

The village of Okunevo is located in the Muromtsevsk Region of Omsk Oblast, 250 kilometers north of the city of Omsk. It was founded in 1770, formerly named Rezino, and was named after its first inhabitant. Okunevo is a village in the taiga that is difficult to access, and most of its inhabitants are ethnic Russians. The village has five main intersecting streets with village-type homes built in various decades of the last century.

An influx of representatives of neo-Eastern movements and numerous pilgrims at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the twenty-first century substantively altered the look of the village. New houses appeared in Okunevo with bright, colorful inscriptions in Sanskrit and Russian, as well as pictures of pink elephants. A Center for Natural Human Development (with consultations on astro-psychology, yoga, massage, seminars and trainings) was opened, and specialized religious literature began to be distributed.

Currently, in the village of Okunevo, which has a population of 700 to 750 people, the homes of Christians and Muslims, Krishnas, followers of Babaji and Neo-Pagans (followers of a neo-Vedic form of Christianity, whose informal leader is Stanislav Repin), stand next to one another. There are popular celebrations of four events in Okunevo — Summer Solstice, the Feast of Perun, the ten-day Hindu Navaratri festival, and celebrations organized by the Om-ist Alexander Hinevich, the leader of the “Ancient Russian Church of Old Believers-Ynglists.” Thousands of people traditionally participate in these holidays: parapsychologists, esoterics, spiritual teachers (*propovedniki*), Hindus and Neo-Pagans, and simply “interested persons.” According to the head of the administration of the Bergamak settlement, about 40,000 people visit Okunevo during the summer (Selezneva 2014: 60).

One and a half kilometers to the northwest of the village of Okunevo, on an elevated terrace on the high bank of the Tara River, on the Tatar

Ridge, there is a ritual site called Omkar, a so-called “secret gate into parallel worlds.” In this space, there are currently an octagonal Orthodox chapel (St. Michael the Archangel), a Hindu altar, a Pagan swastika, and a [sacred] grove, all within a few dozen meters of each other. Old Believers pray at Omkar in the morning, then Orthodox worshippers, followed by devotees of Krishna, who sing at noon. Representatives of various religions consider this to be a holy site, one where the “Okunevo crystal” is preserved, and a place that is connected with Great Asgard. The site is compared to Archaïm (Southern Urals), and its sacral character is often explained by appealing to data that has been obtained from archaeological research.

Dmitry (I): Archaeologists have conducted digs and found very interesting artifacts, but the research has been intentionally concealed, and only black [magic] diggers are digging there (...). There’s a version that there was a city of ancient dwellers who lived here, who as the result of either a deluge or a flood or the lowering of dry land left for India. This explains the interest of Hindus: they tried to obtain information about the digs, but weren’t given access (...) this is why all they do is meditate (...). This region is the land of Tartaria (and the Tara River), and knowledgeable people describe this region and its people as the most ancient.

These data make it possible to include the Okunevo area in the contemporary process of the “invention of tradition” and the birth of a “new mythology,” and they require interpretation of this place by archaeologists, investigation of its historical context, and clarification of the question of the degree to which archaeological data has served as a resource for the construction of this sacral complex.

“The Sacral Complex”: Archaeology of the Village of Okunevo

From 1996 to 1999, the authors of the present article were students at Omsk State University (OmGU) and participated in archaeological and ethnographic expeditions in the territory of the Muromtsevsk Region of Omsk Oblast. At that time, the village was of interest to specialists primarily as an inhabited site in the zone of an archaeological microregion. In the second half of the 1990s and beginning of the twenty-first century, Dr. Vladimir Ivanovich Matiushchenko, a historian, was in charge of the digs in this region. Under his direction, a complex of archaeological monuments located on the left bank of the Tara River in the area of the village of Okunevo was studied. Materials from different eras — from

the Neolithic to the late Middle Ages — were studied (Gerasimov, et al. 2008: 178), and ground-level and mound burial sites, settlements (stopping places, small villages, old settlements) and several sacrificial sites were discovered (Matiushchenko and Tolpeko 1995: 48–49).

Both archaeologists and curiosity seekers were particularly attracted to the composite archaeological complex located on the Tatar Ridge. It is noteworthy that no complexes of settlements were discovered here — they are located farther away and “accompany” this grandiose necropolis without infringing on its boundaries (Matiushchenko and Polevodov 1994: 9). Traces of this “accompaniment” are intensive and varied: there are abundant ceramic fragments in the spaces between the graves; vessels; sites where small bonfires were lit; “special” zones — pits of unclear designation and small ditches that probably separated the spaces of the living from the dead; and traces of some kind of above-ground wooden structures. Currently, all of these are perceived to be half-lost traces of ritual activities that were conducted at this site (Matiushchenko and Polevodov 1994: 109).

Above all, archaeologists interpret the Tatar Ridge as a historical site that came together as a place that was comfortable for the carrying out of cult activities. Evidently, as time went by and ownership of the territory on which the necropolis was located changed, this zone gradually expanded and assimilated from north to south, but it was not substantively displaced. The Tatar Ridge is the most picturesque terrain in the district. It is the endpoint for the shoreline terrace at the conjunction of the flood plains of the Tara and Irtysh Rivers, where a vista opens to all corners of the world (with the exception of the southern direction) (Matiushchenko and Polevodov: 57). Evidently, this site’s potential was noted as early as the Neolithic era, and there is a unique burial complex on the northern end of the promontory.

Ceramic fragments and stoneware are among the objects found in the spaces between the graves, and there are fragments of casting molds, crucibles, plumb bobs, bronzeware and some other material remains. They are concentrated around the graves (Matiushchenko 1997: 86). These findings cannot be interpreted as traces of ordinary “settlement” bronze casting activity because of their low numbers (Matiushchenko 1997: 89). Evidently, we are dealing here with the production of objects for the dead within their own spaces.

As a rule, archaeological discoveries rarely go beyond the boundaries of archaeological discourse and do not have any social resonance, unless their mythological interpretation finds active support. In this case, the archaeological legacy of the village of Okunevo is interpreted in pop-

ular consciousness and this legacy is appealed to by the representatives of new religious movements in the area. In our opinion, Matiushchenko, who was not only an enthusiastic researcher but also an educator, played an important role in this process. He believed that making enthusiasm for knowledge contagious to those around him, especially those interested in “the history and significance of a place,” was an important task for both scholars and well-educated people in general. He consistently conducted his campaign of cultural and historical *likbez*¹ both in the vicinity of the dig sites and in the archaeologists’ camp, irrespective of the status or nature of his audience, whose members could include young village boys, pilgrims and tourists. The differences in intellect and perception of reality forced him to resort to a certain reductiveness in the informational nature of his presentations, which does not, however, mean that he vulgarized his material to suit his audience. He never recounted myths, nor did he support the mythological leanings of his audience. However, if those who approach an examination of the significance of a particular space through the prism of sacrality and myth encounter texts that have been constructed with the use of such phrases as “unique place,” “sacral complex,” “abundance of burials from different eras,” “ritual epochs,” and so on (which a scientifically organized consciousness typically processes through specific filters), the result is an amplification of the initial axiomatic connotations of their original conceptions of the space.

Currently, the residents and guests of Okunevo substantiate the sacrality of this place by explaining that ritual objects “from all the world’s civilizations” were found on the Omkara (the Tatar Ridge), and thus all religions try to conduct their rituals precisely here, at the place “where there is a special energy and a sense of spiritual growth.”

This is where I, like every free person, discovered the channel of Ganesh’s, Shiva’s and Parvathy’s Energies (...). This was easy with the chanting of mantras (...). It’s interesting that everyone who came there — curious tourists and Orthodox believers and women who prayed at the sign of the swastika — moved easily around this place, walked out to the chapel and crossed themselves (<http://www.reyki-tselitel.org/t729-topic>, accessed April 30, 2015).

The connection of a sacral site to a specific archaeological monument occurs fairly frequently in the process of “inventing traditions” (Scythian bur-

1. This is an allusion to the early Soviet campaign to eradicate illiteracy in the USSR, which was called *likvidatsiia bezgramotnosti* (literally “the liquidation of illiteracy”) and generally referred to by the shorthand *likbez*. — The editors

ials at Ukok, Okunev sculptures in Khakassia, the Valley of the Gods in Tuva, the dolmens of the Caucasus, Archaim in the southern Urals). The typological mechanism for the formation of such centers is based on the idea of reactualization, awakening and activation of the sacral potential of archaeological objects invested with supernatural functions (Seleznev 2014: 43). Evidently, in the case of Okunevo, we are dealing with a broadly understood “anthropology of archaeology” (Seleznev 2014: 52), that is, with a mythological interpretation of the archaeological data by the residents and guests of Okunevo. This sacral complex is interesting above all as an example of a folk rather than an institutionalized “locus-based cult.”²

In the words of David Smith and Stuart Burch, legends and traditions, toponymy, historical narratives, and symbols do not necessarily have to be officially represented and reinforced on the level of everyday consciousness; often they are “invisible” to the external observer and are formed spontaneously (Smith and Burch 2012: 400–24). According to data collected by the Omsk-based researcher A. V. Seleznev, the Yurt-Bergamak area, which is forty-five kilometers from Okunevo, is currently experiencing the spontaneous birth of a new sacral complex, “an ancient Slavic temple (*kapishche*),” which local Neo-Pagans (“The Cultural Heritage and Creativity Commune”) view as a burial place of “priestesses” (*zhritsy*) with elongated skulls, and call it the Motherland of Risha, or the Motherland of the White Sages (Seleznev: 50–51). Thus, we are speaking here of the creation of one more variety of hierotopy, of a universal archetype that appears one way or the other throughout the history of culture, and in this sense is not something fundamentally new at the level of the phenomenology of religion.

The Crossroads of Religions

The authors’ interest in the village of Okunevo as a place with a presence of neo-Eastern religious currents began in 2006 through our acquaintance with Pavel, a thirty-three-year old entrepreneur from Omsk who is the anchor of a program on the local channel. It turned out that Pavel often travels to India, is an adherent of the Hindu faith, and goes to Okunevo, where he has the spiritual name of Puran, each weekend to observe religious rituals. The walls of his three-room apartment in

2. The term “locus cult” was proposed by V. B. Yashin, a religious studies specialist from Omsk. In his opinion, unlike the concept of a “local cult,” which characterizes the distribution scale of one faith or another, the category of “locus cult” implies sacralization and the imparting of unique symbolic characteristics to a specific territory or natural-geographic object (Yashin 2012: 96).

Omsk are painted with religious themes, and one room with an altar is set apart exclusively for prayer. Puran follows the teachings of Babaji and even helped the Sufi sheik Freddy Bollag with his trip to Omsk, during which Bollag purchased an apartment in the center of Omsk and a house in Okunevo, where he regularly attended Muslim services. Pavel/Puran became the main character in *Crossroads*, a documentary film about Okunevo directed by Ivan Golovnev in 2006, and served as a sort of “guide ” to the “place of power” that was taking shape in front of our eyes. Pavel described his path to faith as follows:

I came to India for the third time (...). I had a question (...). Why did I have the same feelings when I read a Christian prayer and a Shaivite mantra? I came to Babaji's cave (...). And I saw a vision of Babaji (...). I mentally asked him my question (...). In response the image of Babaji split in two... Here was Babaji and there was Jesus Christ (...). Then they joined again into one image (...). There is one God and one truth (...). It's a pity that many people don't understand this (...). And there are inter-religious conflicts (...). We are all particles of one God (...). There's no reason to divide things, your God is my God (...). Various religions are only paths (...). And with time they will disappear.

Pavel's image was remarkable for another reason as well: he is the embodiment of typical “guests” from Omsk who come to Okunevo to participate in contemporary Babajist rituals; these are young or middle-aged people who are highly educated, are familiar with specialized literature, and are mobile by nature, who write blogs and are involved in entrepreneurship.

The appearance of Babajists in the Muromtsevsk Region where, according to local residents, before the 1990s, the only attractions were an old Church of the Intercession of the Virgin Mary and a mosque in the neighboring Tatar village of Chertaly, was directly related to the activities of Rasma Rozitis. Rasma is a US citizen of Latvian origin (her spiritual name is Radjani), who came to the village of Okunevo at the beginning of the 1990s from the Indian province of Hairahan at the behest of her spiritual teacher Muniraj, the handpicked successor of Babaji, who is venerated as the next mahavatar (incarnation) of the Lord Shiva himself. Her teacher told her to find a place in Siberia where civilization had supposedly first developed 300,000 years ago and where the Temple of Hanuman was located. According to legend, a certain land (presumably Siberia) was bequeathed to Hanuman, where an ancient Vedic temple was built. Her search for this sacred place led Radjani to the village of Okunevo in the Muromtsevsk

Region where, after she had conducted multi-day meditation sessions, she received “the necessary supernatural confirmations” of her teacher’s correctness. As a result of Rasma Rozitis’s activities, the village of Okunevo became the base for a community of Babajists and a Hindu temple or ashram — the only one in Russia. On Rasma Rozitis’s telling:

Archaeologists told me that a place was found in the Okunevo area that had been the site of rituals in ancient times. I stayed in a tent not far from the village and fasted and prayed for five days. On the fifth night I observed luminous manifestations. Light was floating all around me, shining beings approached me, I saw something that looked like machines woven from light, and I heard unearthly music. (<http://www.tainoe.ru/anomalia/zoni/ano-zoni-Russia.htm#Okunevo>, accessed May 2, 2015).

According to Radjani, Omsk was chosen because the name of this town correlates with the holy syllable “Om,” which has, according to mystical Indian teachings, a colossal divine energy, the purest of vibrations that penetrate the universe, and the name of the river and city of Tara (Muromtsevska Region, Omsk Oblast) correlates with the name of an Indian goddess.

According to the teachings of Babaji, the three basic concepts — “Truth, Simplicity, Love” — are the essence of all religions, and the goal of Babaji’s mission is the restoration of Sanatana Dharma — the Sacred Truth that has no beginning and is the foundation of all existing religions but has been distorted as a result of the degradation of humanity (<http://www.saiorg.ru/?id=1068>, accessed March 30, 2015). Various forms of spiritual practices (Vedic sacrifice, veneration of spirits, yoga, ascension to the impersonal Absolute) are regarded as possible steps in spiritual development and knowledge of God. The ultimate goal of this path is love of God and absolute, unselfish service to him. This is likely why this teaching found its devotees among representatives of various religions, who settled very near to one another.

Pronouncements of various residents and tourists about the Babajists are very loyal:

Dmitry (I): In general, we have a lot to learn from the Krishnaites, Babajists and others: there’s no criminality among them and they are very kind people.

The ones whom I had the chance to meet are very pleasant and sophisticated people. They sang bhajan devotional hymns that praised Shiva, Shakti and other venerable Indian gods. And they sang these not just at social gatherings and in the ashram services (“arati”) but

in other convenient situations. I remember waking up at dawn in a small tepee on a hill not far from the magical Lake Shaitan and hearing singing outside. And a person isn't idle, "as soon as he awakes, before doing anything else," he immediately begins to praise God. That's great. And there's another pretty picture in my memory: seven of us head toward the lake and come down from the hill single file on a trail, sunshine, the grass comes to your waist. Good smells; I walk in the back and see everyone — beautiful, in their ethnic clothes, and the one in front is playing the flute (<http://www.ark.ru/ins/zapoved/zapoved/okunevo.html>, accessed May 3, 2015).

Babajists believe that events occurred in Siberia that are described in the ancient Indian poem *The Ramayana*, and that, according to Babaji's understanding, this territory is connected to the renewal of the temple and the forthcoming salvation of Russia in the looming world catastrophe:

[T]he current era, which is marked by the degeneration of morals and the triumph of evil, is coming to an end. The world is waiting for social and natural catastrophes that will radically change the face of the Earth — the primary centers of contemporary civilization will perish, earthquakes, hurricanes and floods will destroy entire nations and continents. Only those who restructure their lives according to the cosmic laws of Truth, Simplicity, Love will be able to survive. (<http://www.saiorg.ru/?id=1068>, accessed March 30, 2015).

In Okunevo, the discourse about the special role of Siberia and eschatological ideas are also very prominent in the views of the Church of the Orthodox Old Believers/Ynglings (founded by Alexander Hinevich).³ They characterize this territory as the cradle of the ancient super-civilization Arctida, where the salvation of all of humanity begins. The global and even cosmic aspect of this myth is perceived as having been in operation here for hundreds of millennia, and on a cosmic scale. There is the notion that in ancient times a scientific-spiritual Aryan center called Asgard the Great existed in the area of Omsk, while around 100,000 years ago at the Okunevo site there was an Aryan palace (*vimanu*) in the form of a temple, at the top of which a crys-

3. Thanks to the efforts of Alexander Hinevich, their charismatic leader, the Church of the Orthodox Old Believers-Ynglings, which has been known since the 1980s, was registered in 1992, although Ynglings themselves assert that their church has existed since time immemorial and was the first religion of the "white race" and the "wise holy ancestors" of the Russian peoples.

tal was installed, “intended to be used for holography,” through which the Aryans “recorded their consciousness.” The temple was destroyed as the result of a certain catastrophe (a flood) (Seleznev 2014: 44), and the proto-Aryans abandoned this place, which led to the degradation of culture and religion. The Ynglings think that the intermixing of the proto-Aryans with the Aryans in India led to the distortion of the original teachings, which only the Ynglings preserved in their pure form.

And so, various polytheistic religions, cults and belief systems characterized by syncretism and apocalypticism are present in the village of Okunevo. Several of these are based on a significant interest in the religious ideas and mythology of the Indo-Iranian cultural complex. As a whole, the idea of this space can be expressed, in our opinion, by the metaphor of a “crossroads,” since it is based on the intersection of historical eras and religious practices.

Mythology of Place

The situation that has arisen in Okunevo presents an interesting example of the process of the “invention of tradition” and the birth of a “new mythology”; inasmuch as the homogeneity of a given place (Werblowsky 1998: 9–17) is destroyed, it increases its “capacity to absorb and reflect a multiplicity of religious discourses” (Eade and Sallnow 1991: 15).

Space and time are distinguished here by their non-linearity and their value-laden semantics. The real and mythological planes merge and constantly switch from one to the other. Space is not only constructed here (in layers, spheres, sacral centers) but also arbitrarily contracts and expands depending on who is acting, and how. In the mythological scenario, the truth is revealed to “the initiated (*posviashchennym*),” as is the capability of communicating in “the subtle realm”: the uninitiated are gradually pushed aside and begin to be regarded as dogmatics who are incapable of overcoming the limitations of the everyday world.

A divine matrix of life (...). From the first days there was an ineffable feeling that this is a special place (...). I don't know why (...). Maybe the sun shines differently here (...) or the sun's rays acquire some kind of new beneficial properties as they penetrate the air and reach the earth in this place (...). Maybe the water in the Tara is blessed (...). Maybe the earth is of a special type (...). Each step taken on this earth removes some kind of “decrepit,” negative, untrue force that we typically use to survive in that other world (...). In the world of distorted thoughts, words and actions (...). Each step gives you a different kind of force that penetrates the body's cells, en-

downing them with a new, primordial condition that corresponds to the divine matrix of life (...). After even a few days it became apparent to me that the tissues of the human body change here (...). Every day your skin, hair, tendons and bone structures were filling up with new energy and changing physically (...). How soundly I slept changed as well (...). At night my consciousness would literally fall through to new, deep levels (...). Bread brought from Moscow always remained as fresh and soft as when it was first baked (...). I kept thinking, how could I best describe what happened to me in a few words (...) I came up with nothing better than what Lao-Tse had already said: “When man is born he is tender and weak, but when death approaches he is hard and strong. All creatures and plants are tender and weak when they are born, but dry and rotten when they die. The hard and the strong is what perishes, and the tender and weak is what begins to live.”

I experienced precisely a birth into an undistorted life (...). A life that corresponds to the Creator’s design for that life and accords with the prototype of the Primordial Divine Matrix of Creation (<http://vk.com/event48086578>, accessed May 3, 2015).

Let us note that when we spoke with our informant Pavel, we were always aware of his presence in his own reality, accessible only to the “initiated.” For this reason, conversation about ordinary topics included references to utterly strange subject matter. Once the Slavic Pagan (*Vedorus*) Stas came to visit Pavel. In response to the ordinary question, “How are things?” Stas responded that everything was fine, but this morning had awoken and could not find his Adam’s apple. Pavel asked in all seriousness what had preceded this event, and Stas responded that during the night he had had a “battle in the subtle realm” with a very strong competitor. “That explains everything,” Pavel summarized. In his opinion, the loss of the Adam’s apple could be explained by Stas’s loss of strength in his battle.

Among those initiated into this tradition and who are regulated by its ethics are included persons who in ordinary life are considered to be “oddballs” and “freaks.” Such is the “blessed” Serega, a local resident of Okunevo, who is a permanent participant in Babajist rituals and, according to our informants’ testimony, many even envy his condition.

In the language of local residents and guests, entrance into Okunevo is marked by a boundary — a break that separates this sacral complex from the rest of the (mundane) world. Omsk researcher I. A. Selezneva distinguishes at least four zones within the sacral space of the village: Central Street, where the ashram of Babaji’s followers is located, as well as the temple of the followers of Krishna and the homes

of the Neo-Pagans; Omkar, the territory of the Tatar Ridge, which is the main energy center where rituals are conducted; Yar, where there is a tourist camp on the road from Omkar to the village; and Tyup, a space created by a bend in the Tara (Selezneva 2014: 60).

In local Okunevo mythology, a mythologization of personages also exists, along with the construction of a unique language (unknown languages are frequently spoken in Okunevo), and eschatological motifs. A distinctive personification of the cosmos, which is perceived as a living, animated whole (as expressed, for example, in descriptions of energy as “living” or “evil”) is realized along mythological principles.

I was alone on this strange hill [the Tatar Ridge — the authors] and it started raining (...). Well how can I describe it? How does a place of power manifest itself? You feel very acutely that you are ALIVE. Right now, in this moment. There is an inexplicable feeling of the significance of what is happening, although it would seem that nothing is happening. You feel the RESPONSE of the surrounding world to your presence here. You feel, and you are felt. I was squatting and holding on to the earth with my hands. I just wanted to suck from it with my hands... I don't know... that which is lacking. (<http://www.ark.ru/ins/zapoved/zapoved/okunevo.html>, accessed May 3, 2015).

We suggest that we can apply Roland Barthes's ideas to identify two levels of myth creation involved in the construction of sacral spaces — “myth-creation from above” and “myth-creation from below” (Barthes 1989: 46–130). Myth-creation from above, or written mythology, has an artificial, constructed character and is a component of ideology. As a rule, representatives of this form of myth-creation are mythographers who have connections and instincts that are topological for the myth. In Okunevo, Mikhail Nikolaevich Rechkin, born in the settlement of Muromtsevo in Omsk Oblast, became such a figure (*Okunevskii kovcheg*, http://rechkin.org/index/mikhail_rechkin/o-16, accessed March 13, 2015). His birthplace was close enough to Okunevo to feel the themes and problems related to the place where the myth arose. In the folk consciousness, Rechkin appears as an inspector and a littérateur, a researcher of anomalous phenomena, who “was able to describe this place and its wonders remarkably vividly and engagingly, without sleep-inducing sophistries” (Seminar v Okunevo). Rumor has it that Rechkin was even shot at from beyond the boundaries of the Okunevo lands, but he “miraculously survived,” although this incident is not mentioned in the official biography on the writer's site.

A series of publications by Rechkin appeared between 2003 and 2011, which in terms of content and informativeness are difficult to discern from one another. They are written in the same passionate myth-making register — that there is a wonderful place where people (although by no means all) can save themselves if they know how (e.g., Rechkin 2011). Thanks to the accessibility of its language, this text is accepted by a broad audience, although not an academic one or one with a critical frame of mind, and it is thus a wholly effective instrument for “myth-creation from above.” We should note that, based on our observations, representatives of religious currents in Okunevo call Rechkin’s opinions “fairytales,” but nonetheless they use them as arguments when a rational achievement of significant goals is inaccessible. Here is an example of Rechkin’s pronouncements:

Those who come here with the desire to see a wonder are often disappointed. It’s an ordinary little Siberian village. True, it’s in a picturesque spot on the steep bank of the small Tara River. It is precisely here that for many years archaeologists from Omsk have been excavating ancient burial sites and finding every possible kind of object from ancient eras. A respectable study, *The Complex of Archaeological Monuments on the Tatar Ridge near the Village of Okunevo*, has been written and published and contains such perfectly banal lines as “there was probably a cult site in this settlement.” Archaeologists are careful people. When facts are inadequate, they prefer to use words such as “probably,” and “possibly,” but an Indian holy man, Sathya Sai Baba, who was far removed both from archaeology and from the village of Okunevo, was deeply convinced that long before scientists discovered this “probable” cult site, the Great Temple of the Sublime Monkey Hanuman was erected very near here (<http://vk.com/event48086578>, accessed May 3, 2015).

To an even greater extent than the imposition of mythology from above, “myth-creation from below” testifies to the current significance of myth in the construction of sacral spaces, and is spontaneous and unpredictable in its mythologization of images, relationships and events. It is realized both in the perception of mass culture and in creative oral folk genres. In “myth-creation from below,” we can include stories (*bylichky*) — oral tales of unusual events that are relayed as absolutely authentic and for which authenticity is underscored by means of everyday details and everyday experience (Martishina 1996: 106).

At the level of popular consciousness, the village of Okunevo itself has for a long time been associated with the presence of supernatural forces: local residents often report seeing unidentified flying objects,

extraterrestrial supernatural phenomena, impenetrable bulwarks (*nepristupnye valy*), twisted trees, labyrinths, and so on. For example, it is thought that people often lose consciousness next to the “magical” Lake Shaitan, with its “various flying spheres,” and its “dead” water. It is reported that three lakes near Okunevo have an unearthly origin, are interconnected through a subterranean river, and the water in them is considered to be holy. A tree near the tiny chapel on the Tatar Ridge can fulfill wishes if touched, and so on. (<http://omsk.tulp.ru/bazy-otdyha/okunevo>, accessed March 25, 2015). Internet fora about Okunevo offer an abundance of stories such as these:

When I first came to Okunevo I hoped to see a Wonder — mysterious phenomena happen here every day. When I didn't see anything unusual, I still left with the thought that “there's something ... secret here.” This time I was “luckier.” After dinner we decided to take a walk to the ridge. As we walked along the river bank, we missed our turn and had to turn back. The sun was already setting when we reached the chapel; darkness was quickly approaching. We took several panoramic pictures, and our first portrait, of my brother's wife. When I saw the photograph, I felt uncomfortable. At first sight it looked like smoke was coming out of her head. I immediately asked her: “Were you smoking?”

“No.”

Everyone took an interest in our conversation and came to look at the photograph. When we enlarged the image and looked closely at the fog above her head, we began to panic. One can in fact observe images, even horrifying and clearly lifeless ones. At that moment everyone realized what kind of place we found ourselves in. This time in Okunevo, I kept asking myself the question: why did Rasma come here, why is it precisely in this spot, on the ridge, that she said: HERE? She must have seen and felt the energy of this place (<http://xroniki-nauki.ru/neobyasnimoe/energiya-okunevo>, accessed May 4, 2015).

According to the testimony of UFO enthusiasts and “occult tourists,” expeditions of researchers who worked in this area in the 1990s are said to have confirmed the presence of non-standard energy fields around the village of Okunevo, and to have discovered five lakes with healing waters, traces of fallen meteorites, and so on. According to their tales, many results of these studies were then classified and Okunevo was declared an energetically anomalous place.

Tourism in Okunevo as a Resource for the Appropriation of Sacral Space and Commodification of History

According to V. A. Shnirelman, if in many contemporary societies popular tourism and its worldly rituals serve as a “replacement for religiosity,” in Russia it can have the opposite effect of nurturing religiosity (Shnirelman 2015: 5). Today, the group of visitors, which can be divided into tourists (whose goal is to see a “phenomenon,” possibly to “feel” the rituals) and pilgrims (Babajists, followers of Krishna, Slavic Neo-Pagans [*Vedorusy*], Buddhists), is the most numerous group in Okunevo.⁴ Those who come as pilgrims immediately settle into the appropriate community and for a period of time adopt its rules of behavior and way of life. Tourists have the freedom to choose — they can either live in any of the communities or separately in a tent, or rent a house, and participate in any ceremony.

Stanislav Repin (a Neo-Pagan):

There are thousands of villages in the country that are not visited by anyone. If people come here for whatever reasons, that means the territory has become attractive to tourists. Many say that it would be better if this hadn't happened, that some kind of sectarians come. The truth is that we have a full cross-section of society here, from immature youth to bureaucrats, businessmen and military personnel. The guiding principle for the residents of the village of Okunevo who follow different spiritual confessions is to search for what unites us rather than what divides us. We can go to the Krishna followers for their holiday and they can come to us. My next door neighbor used his own money to build a Christian church. Normal, harmonious mutual relationships are being created (<http://rusplt.ru/society/pup-rusi-10815.html>, accessed May 4, 2015).

As an analysis of internet fora about Okunevo shows, through popular media, numerous reports about this place, as well as pictures, facts and myths have a substantial influence on the mixing of people here. The development of virtual representations of the place is becoming an important means for constructing the sacral space. Currently, practically every major tourist center has its own site on the internet, its own vir-

4. This is in spite of the fact that a survey conducted by the independent Center for Humanities, Sociological-Economic and Political Research (GEPITsentr) in 2002 confirms the reputation of the Om-ists as “conservative people who adhere to traditional values and are not susceptible to newly fashionable trends of a religious or para-religious nature” (Yashin 2000: 39).

tual image, which determines our perception of the place itself. As David Harvey observes, “Spaces that envelop and surround us in everyday life have an influence on both our direct experiences and on the ways that we interpret and understand representations” (Harvey 2011: 21). The tourists and pilgrims who come to Okunevo already have certain ideas about this place, as well as several conceptualizations that have been created through films, literature, advertising and other means of information transmission. The immutable social utopian motif of a “return to nature” also plays a large role in these conceptualizations.

We submit that the popularity of Okunevo is also connected to the so-called provincial myth, in which the status of an economically peripheral region (Omsk Oblast) is characterized by isolation from resources, the perception of megalopolis values as being deficient, and the constant draw of the center. In an ontological, spatial and semiotic sense, life in a peripheral region is distinctive for its liminality, sense of inferiority and thinness of cultural life, a sense of being located “between the megalopolis and the village.” It is not surprising that, on the one hand, marginality corresponds to a lack of power and a political vacuum, and on the other, new forms of controlling the territory are created. Under these conditions, the myth of the presence of a “place of power” nearby acquires an additional attraction for natives of Omsk and pilgrims from neighboring regions.

Dmitry (I): Somehow this idea of a “place of power” has been eroded or worn out. It is said in vain, so you almost feel uncomfortable using it. But how can you avoid it if there are places where you clearly feel something special? You can arrive there feeling completely out of sorts, with your mind all twisted, and then it feels like someone has dunked your head in the water and you see that everything is different here.

A proposal has been made to include the village of Okunevo in the list of tourist sites in the Muromtsevsk Region’s itinerary (Selezneva 2012: 163). The Omkar Shiva Dham ashram itself and the cult sites associated with it, as well as the energy center not far from the village, are regarded as a “brand.” Most of the tourist companies in Omsk and neighboring cities (Novosibirsk, Kurgan, Chelyabinsk, Ekaterinburg, etc.) offer their clients various forms of recreation in Okunevo: weekend tours, tours for various events that occur there (holidays, seminars, master classes and esoteric trainings), trips around the “places of power, and “energy flows” (Selezneva 2014: 62).

In activities of this type, the dominant discourse emphasizes the way that this territory in particular is permeated with special astral

energies, that an intensive connection to the cosmos passes through this territory, and that spending time in this place awakens hidden strengths and occult capabilities in a person. An advertisement at one of the tourist company's web sites announces:

The five lakes were "birthed by the Cosmos." They were formed as a result of the fall to Earth of the remnants of an enormous meteorite. People who lived here several centuries ago built a temple where a magical crystal was located, which became a type of energy generator that fed the lakes. The water has a strong effect on cell growth, it increases their vitality. It has rejuvenating and healthful effects. The high levels of biological activity in these places makes it possible to discover the knowledge that is hidden within you and new possibilities that you only dreamed about. What is fulfilled here is not what you expect, but what is actually needed.

Urban entrepreneurs have begun working in Omsk by putting groups together, delivering them, working as "middlemen" who transport people not only in a geographic but also a cultural space. By using existing local hierotopic motifs, or by artificially constructing them, they organize pilgrimages, sell goods with the corresponding attributes, and so on. In Okunevo itself, local entrepreneurs, having demarcated a field, offer campsites for additional payment, conduct organized excursions, sell meat for shish-kebabs (although the majority of the believers are vegetarians), as well as "drinking water whose molecular structure has been changed in a pyramid."

We revive the Fire of Striving for the Future in you and connect the spaces of the five lakes that exemplify the ancient spirit of Siberia-Asgard with the water of life! Our company in Omsk produces "Living Tara," drinking water that has had its molecular structure changed in a pyramid. We hope that thanks to the quality of "Living Tara" water, the quality of your life and health will improve. Our product is new to the market. Why did we choose the name "Living Tara?" The Tara River is a river that flows through the territory of Omsk Oblast. If we turn to the sources, we will find out more about Tara, the guardian goddess, whose name the ancient Slavs gave to the Polar Star, who helps and protects those who travel (<http://forum.ar-ear-light.ru/index.php?topic=973.0>, accessed May 3, 2015).

This makes both believers and local residents unhappy: in their opinion practices such as these disturb "the peace, the idyllic quality of the place, personal communication and joy" ("Pup Rusi"). The local residents and

members of local religious communities themselves, in addition to selling domestic products, sell firewood to the “city folks,” provide guide services through the forests and lakes, and make clay dinnerware to sell to the tourists, but at very modest prices. They are also developing the practice of “ethnocultural studios” where souvenirs with esoteric qualities (talismans, amulets [*oberegi*], etc.) are produced.

Taking our cue from what tourists themselves have to say, we can observe that the practice of pilgrimage in the village of Okunevo is based not only on personal motivation (curiosity, the desire to vacation far from town, the desire to change something in their lives, heal an ailment, etc.), but also on objective conditions: the natural setting of the place and its accessibility. Here is the testimony of a female pilgrim to the village of Okunevo:

It's been two years since I visited a place of power in Samara Oblast, near the village of “Volzhsky Utes” — Mt. Svetelka — Glade of the Forest Spirit — City of the Gods. I felt it was time to go somewhere again. I typed “place of power” into a search engine and got a long list of these through the Self-Knowledge [*Samopoznanie*] portal. As I was reading the list, I was listening to myself and trying to determine where I was being drawn to. I wasn't drawn to travel long distances, and among those nearby only the Altai beckoned to me because of fond memories of past trips to this wonderful land. I remembered that I hadn't been to the world-renowned Mt. Belukha site of power, which every self-respecting esoteric feels it a duty to visit at some point. And since I am a self-respecting esoteric, I thought, well I'll go there. But ... something ‘itched’ inside me, there was a feeling of discontent, and the main thing was that I did not feel any joy at the thought of this journey. So I returned to that list of places of power. And I saw something! At first I had my doubts, everything just seemed too simple and vulgar. The village of Okunevo in Omsk Oblast. It was right next door, just a few hours away by car (...). But when I started studying the information about this place, I understood that even the wonderful Altai, and the best resorts in the world (if someone were to offer them to me) fall way behind by comparison with what was waiting for me in this simple, picturesque little village of Okunevo in Omsk Oblast. It's not even the miracles. This is much more for the soul, the spirit. For a person who is ready to touch the most secret thing in the world — the Soul of the universe (<http://univer-u.ru/blog/pochemu-ya-edu-v-okunevo/>, accessed May 3, 2015).

It is also worth noting that some itineraries inside the “sacral space” are considered by tourists to be preferable to others. They turn out to

be ready to actually cooperate in the transformation of the horizons of social existence, thereby opening possibilities for new experiences. We find here an actualization of the practice of travel (*peremeshchenie*), or walking, which Michel de Certeau has compared to the speech act:

First, through his footsteps the pedestrian appropriates the topographic system (analogously to the way that a speaker appropriates and masters a language). Second, in the course of walking space is performed (as in a speech act acoustic language is performed acoustically). And finally, the steps tie the various places into a certain system of relations (a speech act is also always directed towards someone and actualizes specific relations between the interlocutors) (de Certeau 2008: 28).

As a rule, the statements of the Okunevo pilgrims demonstrate that special conditions, special knowledge, and the mystery itself that is present in this place are one of the natural and logical — as well as accessible — ways of getting out of the routine, out of everyday life, of expressing oneself. Undoubtedly, a mechanism of contagiousness is in operation here, and a person, even if religion is foreign to him, who submits himself to this, manifests a psychological readiness to perceive this place as sacred. The acceptance of the idea of the sacral status of a place turns out not to be an unambiguous “yes” or “no,” but rather includes a significant gradation of degrees for its realization. The simplest scheme for constructing a sacral space at the level of popular consciousness looks like this: a level of information and “familiarity” without any particular faith is a starting point that sharply increases the authenticity and meaning of a “place of power” for a person, a belief in its actual existence.

Conclusion

What is the fate of the “Okunevo phenomenon” in the perspective we have observed? As practice has shown, once they have appeared, “places of power” become cultural “assets,” “symbolic capital” (Ivakhiv 2006: 169–75), the control of which becomes the site of a serious battle between various discourses. Archaeologists and historians ask us to turn our attention to the need for painstaking protection of the territory of sites that are connected to the archaeological complex. From their viewpoint, many of these so-called “traces of the past” (*sledy-svidetel'stva*) are deposited on the surface, and for this reason tourist excursions, “holidays” and “carnivals,” and other ritual activities undertaken by representatives of various faiths bring enormous harm to this monument

of the past (Matiushchenko and Tolpeko 1995: 49). Representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church in Omsk Oblast⁵ (cf. Yashin 2000: 40) see a significant threat to Orthodoxy in the existence of such places because “many of our compatriots do not have solid reference points, and for this reason, today they will go to the Babajists, and tomorrow to church.”⁶ Representatives of alternatives to official religious discourses are convinced that “this place was created to unify the souls, bodies and minds of all people.” Using the growth of interest in this place, bureaucrats try to advance their region up the scale of federal significance, since the presence of such places increases the symbolic status of the region, sometimes in spite of its actual condition.⁷ Tourists, who are here by happenstance, without any local roots, try to determine its aesthetic and mystical attraction for themselves. The main point here turns out to be not the formulation of a single true idea, but the discovery of a competitive field of various images and the activation of group strategies.

The Okunevo phenomenon fully corresponds to the constructivist viewpoint of the development of religious consciousness. Unique images of the given territory are formed within the framework of each of the discourses that are present here. When collected at the level of a collective consciousness, these images create a specific “myth of place” (Shields 1991: 47, 61). They collect, classify, include or exclude. They make the space potentially *knowable* to anyone who wants to have a look at it, and they also make it possible to compare it to other, ordinary, spaces.

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5. On the connection of “Oblast Authorities and the Russian Orthodox Church,” see Yashin 2000, 28–40.
 6. From the narrative of Fr. Alexander Lemeshko, superior of the Isilkulsky Church of New Martyrs and Confessors, about his missionary activities in Okunevo at the All-Russian Scholarly-Practical Conference, “Russia and Paganism: Myths and Reality,” Omsk, March 13–15, 2013. <http://www.sofia-sfo.ru/2136>, accessed May 18, 2015.
 7. Cases of the sacralization of objects that have to do with regional history are fairly widespread in contemporary Russian reality (see for example the veneration of Ksenia of Petersburg in Leningrad Oblast, St. Nicholas Velikoretsky in Kirov Oblast, the Uriupinskaya Mother of God in Prikhopye, the Abalaksкая Mother of God in Tiumen Oblast, etc.).

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