Chapter 7. *Mong* and the National Reproduction of Collective Sorrow

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“Do you see this duck? It is made out of fine filigree gold. It represents a Tatar myth about the creation of the world. The duck pulled the islands that make up the earth out of the sea and that’s how the world came into existence.”

Güzel, Tour guide at the Tatarstan National Museum, November 2000

The myth about the duck pulling the earth out of the sea may be understood as a metaphor for how a significant number of Tatar-speakers see their position as inhabitants of the Russian Federation. Many Tatars say they feel surrounded by an undifferentiated sea of Russians—who speak a language Tatars don’t feel comfortable speaking; operate according to social rules incomprehensible and often offensive to them; and are emotionally constructed in ways that simply do not make sense.

What does make sense, by contrast, to Tatar-speakers is something they call *mong*. *Mong* is a generalized feeling of grief-sorrow, a type of melancholy song, the sorrowful melodies that animate the melancholy songs, the sentiment singers singing those songs tap into and transmit, the emotion audience members experience while listening to them, and a topic of ide-

Figure 7.1. Woman’s jewelry
12th-century, Bolgar.
Found near Mokryie Kurnali Village
logical talk. Mong taps into, produces, and reproduces a feeling that unites Tatar-speakers as a nation of people who have suffered collectively. It successfully generates a unifying feeling of collective suffering because individuals are encouraged to understand mong in diverse ways. Flexibility in interpreting mong’s meanings allows Tatars to experience a feeling of collective inclusiveness even while expressing their own individuality. Mong creates a continuous emotional connectedness that serves to separate Tatars ideologically from people they perceive as comprising an undifferentiated “Russian sea.”

Always sung in a minor key and often accompanied by accordion music, mongful songs are marked by long-held, deeply resonant notes carried best by strong, clear, versatile voices (sometimes with professional operatic training) that sonorously sound the songs’ sad lyrics. Typical mong lyrics concern feelings of sorrow and loss expressed metaphorically through an emotional description of a scene from nature. Their lack of specificity connotes that they belong to the nation as a whole, as opposed to individuals. In being laden with an untranslatable mournful nostalgia, mong bears a similarity to the Portuguese musical genre fado. And while mong’s musical qualities differ profoundly from those of American blues, young Tatars aware of parallels between US and Soviet history sometimes refer to mong as “the Tatar blues.”

Mongly jyrlar—mongful songs—are highly conservative in form, even though understandings of mong’s meanings vary widely. Mong is still most frequently produced when groups of people sit around a table drinking tea and singing. Despite mong’s role as an everyperson’s practice, like other surviving Soviet folk arts, its songs have been fixed as texts in books, professionalized by conservatory-trained artists, and commodified as purchasable recordings. While Tatar-speakers considered my research on Kazan’s school system a well-intended acknowledgement of their efforts to create social equity, their eyes widened with delighted surprise when I started asking questions about mong and they said I was really onto something important. Although singing mongly jyrlar is losing popularity among urban youth living at a remove from the rhythms of village life, it nevertheless remains part of the habitual activities of their city-living parents and those relatives who remain in the villages. Moreover, even young urban Tatar-speakers feel that mong is a core feature of Tatar identity.

Perhaps mong’s most significant quality is that it is generally understood to be something Russians do not have nor care to learn about. Russian indifference to mong mirrors other relationships between Tatars and
Russians, colonial in that Tatars know all about things Russian, while Russians are largely unaware of any but the most superficial aspects of Tatar culture. Tatar-speakers habitually say that Russians do not have a word equivalent to *mong* and therefore they cannot understand what it means. Though *mong* is not part of Tatar culture Tatars feel they can explain while speaking Russian, the word is nevertheless rendered in Russian most frequently as “melody,” and occasionally as “nostalgia.” However, recognizing *mong* does not require knowledge of Tatar, just curiosity about its existence. Thus, saying that Russians have no word for *mong* in actuality glosses Russian indifference to *mong* and the insult to Tatar cultural values that that indifference implies.

The first time I heard the word *mong* was in September 1999. I had just been introduced to the Tatar class of eleventh-graders at the Lab School by their head teacher, Hayat *apa*. After they realized that I spoke very little Tatar, they started speaking in Russian. We talked about the Tatar language and they began to explain to me how rich and unique it is. One girl exclaimed, her eyes widening, “Tatar has the word *mong*.” When I asked what *mong* was, they told me, as Tatar-speakers did every time the word came up in a Russian conversation, that *mong* cannot be translated. “*Mong*,” another girl declared, wonder lighting up her eyes, “is everything. Ask our teacher and she can tell you all about it.”

While *mong* is both the song and the feeling the song evokes in singers and listeners, it is also a vehicle for reproducing particularly Tatar feelings about the fate of “the nation.” To be considered knowledgeable about and therefore fluent in *mong*, a person must be able to manipulate all three of its modes—channeling *mong* as an emotion, singing *mongful* songs, and talking about *mong*’s meaning. Not everyone possesses all three abilities in equal measure.

My exploration of *mong* relies upon formal taped interviews, supplemented by ethnographic observations, written sources, and informal conversations. I conducted formal interviews with Sveta *apa*, a talented singer and authority on *mong*, Sveta *apa*’s niece, Hayat *apa*, and her friend, Venera *apa*—both women skillful in producing the affect of *mong* and discourse about it, two teenage girls through whom the feeling of *mong* flows, but who neither sing nor talk about *mong* eloquently, and four Tatar men in their 20s and 30s who call themselves *milläçelär* or nationalists. Because I positioned myself as a married woman while doing research, I have more detailed information about *mong* from other women. However, *mong* is not gendered—neither in its affect, ideology, character as a folk art, nor as a professional music genre.
How *mong* is superficially defined and deeply experienced serves to unite Tatar-speakers on an emotional level. That is, the flexible interpretation of an experience largely inflexible in form by individuals who all consider themselves members of the same nation reinforces their sense of collective belonging. All Tatar-speakers define *mong* identically at a superficial level. However, deeper probing reveals that how Tatars variously comprehend *mong* highlights the diversity of their social positions and individual perspectives in relation to their nation and the world. Tatars first define *mong* as grief-sorrow or *kaygyi xäsrät*—the word’s dictionary definition.4 When asked to elucidate—What is *mong*? Who has it? Where does it come from? What relation does it have to *iman* or religious faith?—the people responding, who all circulate through interconnected Tatar-speaking urban social networks, provided diverse answers. This phenomenon presents an important counterexample to Benedict Anderson’s near-axiomatic definition of how nationalism is supposed to be experienced.

**Tatar Emotions**

An inflexible form of expression for collective mourning, *mong* is both definitive of Tatar national ideologies and part of their reproduction. It represents both an intensification of everyday emotional expression and a departure from conventional norms. Despite its perceived centrality to a unified Tatar experience, *mong* stands apart from other varieties of Tatar verbal expression—including other song genres—by not accommodating innovation or variation.

Emotions vary from one culture to another.5 Unlike Russians, Tatar-speakers consider engaging in lament inappropriate reactions to grief and other emotionally difficult moments. Even when speaking Russian, Tatars attempt to refrain from giving in to negative emotions like anger and unrestrained sorrow, especially when those emotions manifest themselves in shouting and shedding tears. Tatars regularly remind themselves of the need to negotiate by maintaining certain affective practices. Just as Tatar-speakers discourage expressing negativity, so they encourage the communication of positive emotions. They convey the latter through the racialized gaze of *iman nury*, frequent declarations of fondness and love for one another, and a didactic metadiscourse that ideologizes expressing positive feelings as integral to how Tatars as a nation should behave.

*Mong* helps Tatars to maintain calm in a tumultuous surroundings. It provides them release by presenting an opportunity to vent sorrow in an
acceptable manner. While mong emerges from the same cultural system of emotional openness as iman nury and achyk bet, its performance is framed by particular moments set off from everyday interactions. In contrast to their habitual behavior, when Tatars sing and listen to mongful songs, their gazes retreat from those of the people surrounding them, as they focus inward on their own personal sorrows, and they permit tears to form in the corners of their eyes. Despite their inwardly focused gazes, participants in the rituals that reproduce mong are physically completely integrated into the collective as they let the “ancient, unchanging melodies” flow through them.

**Mong as Practice**

This section describes the rituals that produce and reproduce mong and demonstrates how tapping into mong fortifies feelings of national suffering. Both settings portrayed here emerged as a result of the national fluo-

ence that followed the Soviet Union’s collapse. The first setting is a Turkic cultural cruise and the second a Tatar classroom in the academi-

ically competitive Lab School.

**Singing the Nation’s Sorrow**

As a research site, the Turkic cultural cruise was comparable to Mark Twain’s novel *Huckleberry Finn*. Just as social relations between Huck and Jim were based on parity as long as they floated down the Mississippi River, the people on the Turkic cruise were isolated from the most severe external social inequities. The society on board the cruise ship provided an environment in which Tatars could be free to be Tatar without having to worry about offending Russians. Referred to as a mini-hadj, and embarked upon repeatedly like the hadj’s smaller stages, the cruise is an annual cultural event for constructing and reinforcing a not necessarily Muslim, post-Soviet Tatar identity.

The small ship disembarks from Ufa and sails along the Belyi and Volga Rivers to Kazan and back over the course of a week, stopping at sites of significance to Tatar culture along the way. Musicians stage nightly concerts, after which the cruise’s organizers hold exclusive midnight banquets in the dining room while everyone else attends inclusive Tatar discotheques and spontaneous musical performances on deck. Although a few passengers did not speak Tatar, those of us who did, for
once, didn’t have to calculate whether or not conversing in that language was appropriate. The repeated creation of this cultural space has had an enduring effect on its participants, who plan and save throughout the year in order to take the cruise again and thus renew the feelings of joy and belonging they experience during it. The cruise encourages people to engage in what they feel to be the most Tatar kinds of relations and provides them a forum to talk about, create, and experience mong. Due to the coincidence of being able to take pleasure in being Tatar and to speak Tatar freely and uninterruptedly, the cruise reinforces Tatars’ generally held belief that culture resides in language.

On board the cruise I took in July 2000 was the much-loved Tatar singer Färidä Kudasheva, a small woman with a benevolent gaze, auburn hair, and the high cheekbones and round cheeks characteristic of Eurasian Turks. One evening after dinner Färidä apa gave a concert in celebration of her 80th birthday. When she began to sing, instead of smiling and looking each other in the eyes as they had during performances at previous concerts, the audience members tightly packed together in the ship’s stuffy hold sat somberly without moving. Hints of tears glinted in their eyes. Their gazes were still, uncharacteristically disconnected from the present moment. The songs Färidä apa sang were slow in tempo and minor in key. A mournful accordion accompanied her voice. About halfway through her performance, Färidä apa stopped singing and explained that she had decided to sing only mongly jyrlar that evening. After another hour, the concert ended. The Master of Ceremonies came on stage and thanked Färidä apa profusely for her performance. Then, people from the audience started presenting the singer with gifts. Before placing their gifts in her hands, smiling, their gazes once again connected to the people in their immediate surroundings, each person congratulated Färidä apa on the occasion of her 80th birthday and thanked her for the concert. She received each gift with a kiss or an embrace.

One middle-aged woman, who said that she had grown up in Sverdlovsk (now Yekaterinburg) among Russians, asked permission to make her presentation in Russian. After implying that she didn’t know Tatar well enough to speak it, the woman talked about the lyrics to Färidä apa’s songs. She said they reminded her of her childhood and how her äbi—Tatar for “grandmother”—used to listen to Färidä apa’s music. She explained that, after taking the cruise three times, she had come to understand the significance [znachenie] of the songs’ words. Several other audience members made similar statements regarding the memories that Färidä apa’s songs had conjured. All mentioned that hearing Färidä apa
sing brought back recollections of listening to her songs on the radio as children in the company of now-dead relatives. Their speeches often nostaligically referred to the natal villages in which most no longer lived. For those people, it seemed, the cruise provided an opportunity to recreate village social relations.

On another occasion, which I videotaped, the eleventh grade class at the Lab School arranged a tea-drinking session for my fiancé and me. One of their teachers, Sveta apa, hosted the event and had the teenage students sing for us. At her request, they happily sang the unofficial Tatar national anthem, Tugan tel [Native Tongue], based upon the best-known work by pre-revolutionary Tatar poet Gabdullah Tukay. Then, Sveta apa asked the pupils to sing a mongful song for us. The pupils protested that they did not know any mongful songs. Sveta apa scolded them, saying, “You need to learn mongful songs. Otherwise, who will teach this mong to your children? You know,” she continued, “when I have difficult moments, I sing.” Then, she began to sing alone. She chose the ancient song Täftiläü, in which, she informed me on a later occasion, “all the mong of the Tatar people, all its past, all its grief-sorrow and the painful existence that has accumulated through the centuries has been placed.” As she sang, the smiles dropped off the pupils’ faces. Their eyes got misty and their expressions became mournful and distant. The only people somewhat unaffected by the song were the class’ sole boyfriend-girlfriend couple, who were flirting with each other. But, by the end of the song’s three verses even the girlfriend had developed a removed gaze.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Täftiläü</th>
<th>Täftiläü</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ah, my sacred mongly saz,</td>
<td>Ay, mökädäs mongly szazyrm,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You played such a short time?</td>
<td>Uynadyng sin nik bik az?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You are broken, my flame is snuffed,</td>
<td>Sin synasyng, min sünämen,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are separated in the end.</td>
<td>Aerylabyz axrysy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flying around the edge of the world</td>
<td>Ochty dön’ya chiterennän</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The bird of my heart was pinched.</td>
<td>Tarsynyp küngelem koshy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Even if God created happiness on earth,</td>
<td>Shat yaratsa la jihanga,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It would still be alien to me.</td>
<td>Yat yaratkan Rabbsy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 7.2. Lyrics to Täftiläü

The teenagers present at this event were primarily urban-dwelling. However, they frequently “returned” to their parents’ villages. This means that, unlike their Tatar teachers, who grew up in villages and only started speaking Russian once they migrated to Kazan to go to university, they
are both physically and culturally distanced from mong as a habitual practice. However, through even relatively infrequent experiences of mong, these children feel mong and exist, at least intermittently, in a discursive world shaped in part by mong’s grief-sorrow.

**Mong as Ideology**

In addition to being a practice, mong is an explicit ideology, or rather a set of related ideologies, about what it means to be Tatar in post-Soviet Russia. While the Tatarstan government has no official stance on mong, it is considered an integral part of Tatar identity. Thus, mong receives government support insofar as it comprises a national cultural activity. For example, the Tatarstan government-run radio station employed singers of mong and promoted their careers, before it was privatized in 2005. Government-funded publishers print books on mong and government-controlled newspapers print articles about it, like the one cited below.

**Orthodox Interpretations**

The experiences of mong the passengers on the Turkic cultural cruise described are not unique to them. A newspaper article entitled “Mong Enlivens the Soul,” printed in the Tatarstan former Communist Party Organ newspaper *Vatanym Tatarstan*, illustrates this. The view of the article’s author, named Matshin, adheres to the most orthodox interpretation of mong, as characterized by its dictionary definition:

> Whether grieving or rejoicing, song does not abandon a person. The art of song provides a person with a lifelong companion. Everyone has been raised (tärbialändä) in his or her lifetime with the songs s/he heard performed while lying in the cradle. Song links the present with the future. Song, purifying our soul and fortifying our hopes, is a godlike force that enriches our spiritual strength.

> Yes, our people is a nation given to the art of song from its very soul. At the nation’s foundation lies a thousand years of mong. History itself made a gift of mong. Our people’s pride and vigilance are becoming fortified: in fire our people do not burn, in water they do not sink—they conquer the enemy of the nation. Thus, those summoned to death sing as they come. They are born with song. Through song they come to know the world! In short, in the existence of mong is the nation’s entire soul, its people, and its history.

Even though other varieties of Tatar music, including folk songs—called *xalyk jyrlary*—exist, Matshin claims that mong is the fundamental Tatar
musical genre because it is central both to everyday existence and to life’s major events. Moreover, like many people I spoke to, he claims that mong has been central to reproducing the Tatar nation as a collective for a thousand years, and, indeed, constitutes the nation’s very essence. Matshin’s proud nationalist tone does not seem to fundamentally differ from other Tatars’ opinions regarding mong. Rather, writing for the Tatar press, Matshin does not expect any non-Tatars to “overhear” his words.13

Channeling Mong

Sveta apa likewise provides an orthodox view of mong, albeit crafted for a non-Tatar audience. Around 60 years of age at the time of our interview, Sveta apa is a respected singer and a hadji. Islam’s most conservative forms prohibit musical performances, especially by women, since entertaining with music implies the provision of other forms of entertainment as well.14 However, Sveta apa, who has not only visited Mecca, but fasts during Ramadan and observes other Muslim prohibitions—like that against drinking spirits—sees no conflict between the teachings of Islam and singing.

Sveta apa once described mong to me in a way that seemed to embrace pre-Islamic Turkic beliefs according to which the supreme being is the Sky God, Kük-Tängri.15 Speaking more Russian to me than she did on any other occasion before or after, Sveta apa treated mong as if it were a supernatural force from on high.

“I sing and mong flows. From where I don’t know.” She gestured towards the sky.
“Mong can’t be translated by a single word. It is melody and energy…”
“And nostalgia,” I added. She nodded in acquiescence.
“You can’t translate mong into American because America is made up of many different peoples. There cannot be a unifying mong.”

When Sveta apa granted me a formal videotaped interview about mong in Tatar over a year later, in July 2001, she readied herself by combing her hair and applying lipstick. Then, she seated herself in front of the camera, placing a volume of mongful songs on the table next to her for reference. Referring to a book, even one published by the Soviet press, does not render Sveta apa’s knowledge of mong inauthentic, for being authentically Tatar doesn’t entail rejecting Soviet-vetted cultural objects. Rather, Sveta apa’s use of a reference book indicates the generally acknowledged Tatar
respect for the printed word, as well as her special status as ukugan keshe—an educated person.

Sveta apa began the interview by asserting that mong is a quality Americans don’t have, due to our diversity, and also something that does not exist in the English, German, French, or Arabic languages, and consequently—she implied—not in speakers of those languages. Moreover, she suggested, since mong is translated as “melody” in Russian, Russians don’t understand its meaning either. She insisted that mong does not belong to individuals, but instead is an attribute of the nation:

*Mong* is the roads along which the Tatar people has passed. It is the whole history of the Tatar people’s existence, its pain…It is the history of our entire existence passed down through the centuries from our ancient forefathers, our Bolgar forefathers. Mong is everything the people—broken and unbroken—has lived through.

Sveta apa thus understands mong to constitute the sum total of the Tatar nation’s experience.

*Mong* belongs to the nation because it both resides in the people as a whole and, through its reproduction, recreates the collective. In Tatar villages today, as in Sveta apa’s accounts of her childhood, frequent back and forth visiting between households strengthens collectivist connections. Thus, when Sveta apa spoke of her parents singing, she described scenes in which several households had gathered together. Mong thus belongs neither exclusively to the private sphere—the domestic unit—nor entirely to the public sphere—mass media. Rather, mong exists in an interstitial space somewhere between private and public, since the unit that produces and reproduces it is constituted of a loosely bound and shifting community of relatives, neighbors, and co-nationals in whom mong is considered to reside. As Sveta apa explained:

*Mong* is an attribute of our people because song is in the entire people, not in separate individuals. The people survived because of mong. This mong has enabled the people to live and to work. Mong has given the people strength to live through difficult moments, even when conditions have been hard. During painfully tragic times, the people have somehow drawn strength from these songs, from mong. It has found an example by which to continue living. It has learned to understand the difference between right and wrong. That is, I think that song in general teaches a person, a Tatar person, tärbiia….

Despite the fact that tärbiia consists of innumerable sets of acquired appropriate behaviors, it is perceived as an absolute, something that people either do or do not have—an essential quality. And for Sveta apa, the
essentialness of tärbiia is tightly linked to mong. Indeed, she pointed out, “a mongly person cannot be uncultivated [tärbiiazez]. I think a mongly person cannot be uncultivated because his or her inner world is necessarily cultivated. S/he cannot speak a rude word.”

Because Sveta apa is among the most religious Tatar-speakers I know, I wanted to find out whether she thought there was a relationship between the existence of mong and Muslim faith or iman. Her response to my question was:

Undoubtedly. I am of that opinion. You can’t expect anything from a person without faith. I think that mong and faith are the neighboring green roots of one tree. A person who has faith has a light in his or her eyes—it is like that in any people. No matter which religion that people considers good, if there is faith deep in the heart, the face will be pure and full of light.

Thus, mong and iman nury—the light of faith—are parallel phenomena. Echoing her previous statement to the effect that mong is a force that descends as a gift from on high, Sveta apa continued:

Mong comes from the heavens [küktän]. I think that God gave me mong as a gift. It is a very great gift. God gave me a voice, s/he gave the singing of songs, and s/he gave mong.17 It is not my possession. It comes from God. It is not something discovered by me. It was presented through my parents’ hymns.18 My father has a voice.19 My father therefore sang very beautifully, very mongfully he sang. Maybe it is possible that my voice descended to me through my father’s hymns. However, the hymns are a gift from God.

Sveta apa’s assertion that she received mong through the “hymns” her parents sang conveys how mong has been passed down from one generation to another, as well as how it is reproduced among people of the same generation. Singing mongly jyrlar transmits knowledge of the songs and how to sing them, while simultaneously producing the affect of national unity in shared suffering. Using the example of one of the most popular mongly jyr, Sveta apa explained why a song describing a dark forest is really about Tatar history. She said that the song Kara Urman—The Black Forest—speaks of

painful existence, the painful years, the pain our people endured from various other peoples….Agony, blackness [karangylyk]. Black times and painful times, but our people emerged from this pain to easier times as a result of its perseverance and patience [sabyrylyk].
This blackness is the same *karanglyk* described in the previous chapter.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Old Black Forest</th>
<th>Iske Kara Urman</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All black is the forest, Dark night.</td>
<td>Kara da gynai urman, Karangy töń.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good horses are needed to pass through. During the period passing through the black forest, During the period the birds sing, ai, It is very melancholy then.</td>
<td>Yaxşy atlar kiräk läi utärgä, Kara urmanny chykkan chakta. Koshlar sairagan chakta, ai, Bik yamansu shul chakta.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The times are painful, The years are lean, To move through this world a true friend is needed. When we passed through the black forest, I cut down and took with me twin birches, ai, Let us not separate, my dear friend.</td>
<td>Zamanalar avyr, Ellar yabyk, Dus-ish kiräk dön’yalar kötärgä. Kara urmanny chykkan chakta, Kisepaldymkushkaen, ai, Aerylmyik, duskaem.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 7.3. Lyrics to Kara Urman

When I asked Sveta *apa* how lyrics about nature pertain to actual histories of suffering, she responded as follows:

*Mong* is the tree that grows next to the freshwater spring. It is the birds in the barn. *Mong* gives of the reserve of happiness and joy that accumulates during those times in our lives when living is good. But, life is like that—it has good times and bad ones as well. During bad times the people have acquired the ability to summon their own *mong* and imagine poetic words. Thinking about composing meaningful words, the people have learned how to try to understand its situation. They have learned how to make the bad times pass—to put itself at ease and to emerge from that painful situation intact.

*Mong* is therefore historical for at least three reasons. It conjures up a past prior to and better than the pain of the present. It has been used as a tool to live through difficult moments in Tatar history. And it reminds singers and listeners of the historical moments when Tatar people needed *mong* most.

**Allegorical History**

Even though Tatars speak of *mong* as an expression of Tatar historical tragedy, the lyrics to mongful songs never concern history. This is remarkable because Kazan Tatars often speak of the horrors perpetuated when Ivan the Terrible conquered Kazan in 1552, such as how the Volga River flowed red with blood and how, later, Tatars were forcibly, sometimes unawares, baptized with water from that river. This forms part of a
larger discourse about how Russian conquest, colonization, and subsequent Soviet rule served to forcibly assimilate masses of Eurasian Turks. Tatars also describe how their forefathers were kept off well-watered, fertile land after 1552 and barred from pursuing trade until the 18th century. However, these themes are never addressed in song. Rather, mong song lyrics convey the burden of existence [tormysh avyrlygy] allegorically, frequently concerning separation [aeru], a euphemism for death. Tatars see the pain of death separation clearly in lyrics about how the wild goose that landed on the lake has flown away. Lyrics about love refer to universalized mother love and never to the individual romantic variety, known as mäxäbät.21

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Wild Goose</th>
<th>Kyr Kazy</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The wild geese have flown away, have you seen how they rose up into the air? The wild goose Is on the edge of the Idel [Volga River], My lonely head aches so. Do you know, my friend, do you feel it The separations that are about to take place? The wild goose Plays so in the waters. My lonely head forever thinks of you. The geese with goslings are in the water, The childless ones fish on its edge; The wild goose Is on the edge of the Idel, My lonely head aches so. We’re parting, my friend, do you feel it, Will you miss me in a foreign land? The wild goose Plays so in the waters, My lonely head forever thinks of you.</td>
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Figure 7.4. Lyrics to The Wild Goose

**The Gulag**

Invoking mong to convey unspecified moments of historical tragedy allegorically may mask tragedies that have occurred in real historic time. Examining how Soviet history has personally affected Sveta apa suggests a more conventional explanation for why mong signifies both nostalgia for an idyllic past and grief-sorrow.
Sveta apa’s father was a talented singer of mongly jyrlar. He also fought in the Soviet Armed Forces against the Nazis during World War II. After the war, Sveta apa’s father was arrested—probably as a “traitor” for having been interned in a German POW camp—and sentenced to 25 years in a labor camp outside Irkutsk, in Siberia. He was freed in the mid-1950s after serving ten years of his sentence, at a time when the majority of the Soviet Union’s slave labor force was released following Stalin’s death in 1953. His granddaughter, Hayat apa, once showed me a picture of him after his return from the Gulag. Similar to images of Nazi concentration camp survivors, the face in the black-and-white photograph was haggard, drawn and covered in wrinkles, with eyes that burned forth with knowledge of unspeakable horror. During our interview Sveta apa informed me that her father had been able to maintain his inner world while in the Gulag, and that he had remained a human being—a keshe—despite the experience of being there. “It seems he was able to preserve himself,” she explained. “This is connected to those mongly jyrlar.”

Sveta apa described the awakening of her own mong as occurring while her father was serving in the Soviet Army. She said she had begun to sing at the age of seven, during the war. At the time, there was still no television, no radio, and no electricity in the village. The villagers used kerosene lamps for light, she told me. Singing was the primary form of entertainment. After her father’s arrest, when Sveta apa would have been in her early teens, she traveled to Siberia to visit him at least once. Though mong possessed Sveta apa early in childhood, its full power as an expression of grief-sorrow seems to have been revealed to her after her father returned from Siberia. Such experiences—transitions from innocence to awareness—are in fact a collective phenomenon for Kazan Tatars and members of Soviet nationalities who remained in the USSR after the 1917 revolution or returned there after World War II. Every family I got to know suffered at least one such tragedy during the years of Soviet rule.

**Other Mong**s

Sveta apa’s niece, Hayat apa, also granted me a formal interview on the topic of mong. Present at the interview with Hayat apa was her friend, Venera apa, a surgeon and, like Hayat apa, a woman in her mid-forties. When I asked the two women what mong is, Venera apa was quick to answer. “A mongful person is a person who understands the feeling born of separation sorrow, a person who sings his or her own sorrow melodi-
ously, a person who is able to put sorrow into song…” I turned to Hayat apa and asked whether she agreed with her friend. She immediately shifted to a larger frame of analysis:

I agree, but mong is connected to a particular person’s nation. It is a feeling connected to the nation because for some nations mong is deeper, more painful, and more widespread. In others, mong is shallower, less burdensome, and less widespread. This has to do with whether nations have had many trials, whether a people has lived through a lot, and endured a long existence. Mong is a deep inner feeling, though for some nations mong is only in their song.

Hayat apa thus distinguishes between two kinds of nations—one whose mong is deeper due to great suffering and another whose mong shallower because its suffering is less, and consequently only exists in song.

Repeating a question I put to Sveta apa, I asked Hayat apa whether mong is an exclusively Tatar trait. Sveta apa had responded that she thought other Turks most likely possess mong, but that, except for Bashkir songs, she had little familiarity with their music. Demonstrating a perspective broader than her aunt’s, Hayat apa remarked that she has heard mong in folk songs from the British Isles. Speaking of a people closer to home, Hayat apa continued:

For example, I would not say that this thing called mong is not deep in the Russian people. Sometimes we say that our Russian people...that the word mong is not in the Russian people and that it has no meaning for them. But, the Russian people have endured many trials, has seen many tragedies, and as a nation has been a political victim.

Unlike her aunt, Hayat apa made a direct link between horrors committed during the years of Soviet power and the existence of mong. She also acknowledged that Soviets of all nationalities suffered during the socialist period. She clarified as follows:

Political victim. You see, Tatars think that Russian politi...politicians of Russian nationality were the victimizers...but politicians of Tatar nationality created political victims as well. Political victimization came from many directions. However, Tatars’ mong is deeper and heavier. That mong is the nation’s mong. For example, our Tatar nation has its own mong. Every generation has its own mong because every generation has its own trials and every person has his or her own mong. Taken altogether, I think that a person has to have some sort of inner world, to have experienced the tragedy of the world.

Hayat apa recognizes mong as something determined variously according to national, generational, and individual experiences. She perceives it as a
metaphor for tragedy extending beyond the specific context of singing and listening to songs. In fact, she asserted that music is not required for a person to know mong.

*Mong* can be very deep in a person who does not know a single song, a single tune. *Mong* can be very deep in a person who does not know how to sing. In the first place, it is understood that mong is the heart [küngel] of a person who knows how to sing. However, a person who doesn’t know how to sing can still be full of mong.

I asked Hayat *apa* what mong’s origins were. In response, she shifted her focus from the recent tragedies of the nation that are still part of living memory to mong as an expression of sorrow by practical, intelligent women lacking the proper political tools to battle patriarchy during the pre-colonial period:

A very long time ago Tatar women placed their own pain in mong. Why did they place it in mong? Because, how do I say it? Mong had entered their hearts. First of all, even if they had a lot of opportunities, they were not able to take their own places in the republic. They were not able to take their place in the republic. That was also mong because, even though they had opportunities, because of certain laws they couldn’t find their own place in that republic. We call this mong; they were not able to provide for the fates of their children. Their desire to provide for the fates of their children was very great. However, authority hung over their heads and they weren’t able to provide for their children. [At the time,] there were a greater number of practical, intelligent women and they knew better [than women today] what would make for happy marriages for their daughters and sons. But, they were not able to make this known.

Hayat *apa*’s inclusion of Russians and other ethnic groups as capable of possessing mong and her use of mong to express a feminist critique of pre-colonial Eurasian society reflect aspects of her social position as a teacher and a mother. First, her role as a teacher of Tatar language in various educational institutions requires that Hayat *apa* bridge cultural gaps between Kazan’s nationalities on a daily basis. Second, she was the mother of two unmarried sons for whose futures she wanted to provide. Like other Tatars, Hayat *apa*’s social position influences how she understands and speaks about mong. Even while acting as an authority on Tatar culture, Hayat *apa* uses talk about mong as an opportunity to express how the world looks from her personal perspective.

Sveta *apa* sees mong as a force bestowed by God upon people whose inner worlds are cultivated [tärbiålängän]. Not a possession of individuals, mong belongs to the entire nation because collectively calling it forth through song allows the nation to survive painful historical periods. The
nation for her is the Tatar nation, although she acknowledges that Bashkirs have mongful songs and concedes that other Turks probably do as well. Venera apa, by contrast, understands mong to be the ability of certain individuals to express sorrow, which she presumes to be a Tatar trait. Hayat apa, less ethnically insular in her everyday interactions than the other two women and used to presenting Tatar culture to outsiders, suggests that mong assumes different forms depending upon the varying factors determining a person’s social position. These include nation, generation, individual experiences, and gender.

Unlike the other interviewees, Hayat apa asserts that every nation possesses mong, but that the depth of that nation’s historical tragedy and the extent to which it has been a victim of political repression dictates the profundity of its grief-sorrow. Thus, she acknowledges that Russians have mong, but that theirs is not as deep as Tatar mong, because, she suggests, while Russians have been political victims, Tatar politicians participated in russifying policies, thus betraying their own nation. Her statement implies a national gradation of guilt. Even so, Hayat apa’s vocation as a teacher of Tatar language to diverse groups of people means that she has to find ways to appeal to, as well as make appealing to herself, the inner worlds of persons belonging to different nationalities.

Transformative Returns

Mong is both an experienced practice and a transformative metaphor. Cultural anthropologist James Fernandez makes a compelling argument for how children, whom he terms inchoate subjects, acquire knowledge of their adult roles through the predication upon them of their culture’s core metaphors. The processes through which children expressively learn to perform these metaphors allow them to situate themselves indexically as members of their communities and thereby “return to the whole,” that is, become fully integrated members of society.

As helpful as Fernandez’s model is for conceptualizing how children become acculturated, it is nonetheless ahistorical. Unlike his inchoate subjects, young Tatars do not return to the whole inhabited by their elders. This is true for young urban and young rural Tatars alike. Dissimilar from the generations who grew up under Soviet rule, young urban Tatars have not discarded Tatar as their native language. They are nonetheless surrounded by the Russian language and deeply enmeshed in cultural space replete with Russian metaphors. Being surrounded by things Russian
means, in essence, that urban Tatars acquire the core metaphors of overlapping cultural spaces inscribed in uses of two different languages. Likewise, rural Tatars, upon reaching adulthood, enter into “a whole” different from that inhabited by their parents. Unlike urban Tatars, rural Tatars inhabit a cultural space predicated upon living in the Tatar language. Even so, the collapse of the Soviet Union has caused the cultural space all Tatars enter upon reaching adulthood to both exponentially expand and contract in ways their parents cannot comprehend. Post-Soviet cultural space has expanded insofar as previously nonexistent opportunities have sprung up to travel, acquire wealth, and experience the cultural and consumer products of non-socialist countries. Cultural space has simultaneously contracted since most ex-Soviets’ plummeting standard of living has curtailed their ability to travel even within once-Soviet territory, to maintain their health through adequate nutrition and taking vacations, and also to purchase clothing, books, appliances, and so on. These revolutionary changes have affected every aspect of Tatar life, including mong. What then is the place of mong among Kazan’s new generation of Tatar speakers, who though living with the city’s urban rhythms, perceive authentic Tatarness to lie in village life?

**Generational Transmission**

The practice of singing mongful songs is rooted in a village life without modern amenities. This comprises part of living memory for most Tatars—even now, though villages have electricity, they usually lack plumbing, while Tatarstan’s “gasification” campaign to bring indoor heat to the villages occurred only in the 1990s. Even when mong is produced in other environments—on cruise ships or in classrooms—the participants are reenacting a village social setting. Though mong continues to be a central component of the lives of Tatars middle-aged and older raised in a rural environment, it has grown peripheral to younger Tatars’ tärbiä. As Sveta apa explained:

Song is the Tatar’s constant companion. At every social gathering, during every holiday celebration, songs are sung. Now there is television and radio. Now at gatherings people put other kinds of music on the tape player. This tradition is leaving us. Before the entire people participated. Singing would help to get work done. Now children study singing in school. This is not good because it is no longer the entire people.
Sveta *apa* described the paradox stemming from the re-urbanization of Tatar society:

Generally, the ancient songs are changing and leaving us now. They are disappearing. They still exist, but they’re receding. All the same, the people listen a lot to these long, mongful songs, always with feelings of deep love, and a person who can sing passes around strength among the people listening to the songs. Unfortunately, though, this meaning is passing away and leaving our life.

This transformation mirrors a generational transition in what constitutes a social gathering. Unlike their elders, young urban Tatars generally prefer dancing to popular music to sitting around a table singing songs. However, when the dances have adult chaperones as those held at schools always do, the adults maintain the old traditions—drinking tea, eating cakes, and singing—while their children dance to new songs in a neighboring room. The majority of the songs played at these dances are Russian and Europop, which means that young urban Tatars may have greater familiarity with the hits of Turkish pop icon Tarkan than they do with music in their “native” tongue. By contrast, discos organized in Tatar villages play mostly Tatar popular songs. And at the Friday night discos held in Kazan’s new *Tugan Avylym* restaurant complex—targeting, I was told, villagers who haven’t yet adjusted to city life—all the music is Tatar and people sing along with their favorites while they dance.

Beyond these significant changes to the ways Tatars socialize, younger Tatars also have the good fortune to be generationally removed from first-hand memories of the most extreme horrors perpetrated during the Soviet period. While they absorb *mong* and feel it, asserting that *mong* is central to being Tatar, they rarely generate it through song. Several interviews with Tatar Lab School graduates, who are urban-dwelling, but make frequent visits to their parents’ native villages, demonstrated that they, at least, had difficulty formulating ideas about *mong* without reverting to speaking Russian. About eighteen years old when I interviewed them in 2001, these young adults are among the first urban cohorts to enjoy the decreased stigma against speaking Tatar in public. Here are the key lines from an interview with two of them, typical in terms of the code-switching that takes place as young Tatars translate the untranslatable. *Italics indicate Tatar; bold signifies Russian.*

A: *It is very difficult to explain correctly about mong. The necessary feeling…*

E: *Soulful, I would say…*
A: Yes.
E: Soulful.
A: It’s a certain, it is a word that cannot be directly understood when translated. Perhaps we Tatars can explain, but, as I understand it, a Russian word, in Russian language there is no such word. Because the information, even a certain national feeling, is not there. Tatar people. Mong.

Mongful songs are in the people’s heart, as I understand it. A certain...
E: Soul.
A: Soul. It is connected to soul...

These teenagers, who had been among those in Sveta apa’s class when she sang Täfîlâü, employed the Russian word for “soul”—dusha—as a calque for the Tatar concept of a person’s inner world.27 By contrast, older Tatar-speakers never rely on discourse about the “soul”—jan in Tatar—to explain mong. While Tatars in early adulthood figuring out what it means to be urban and Tatar-speaking in Russian society find deep significance in emotional mong, mong is not something they frequently tap into by singing or about which are they adept at speaking.

Active understandings of mong seem to be embedded in cultural practices that occur when speaking Tatar. However, not only do most young urban Tatars prefer dancing to singing, they speak Tatar language exclusively in school and university classes with their Tatar-dominant teachers. Many respond in Russian when their parents address them in Tatar. Thus, although these younger Tatars can recognize mong and feel it, they lack, for the time being at any rate, the necessary linguistic and life experiences to discuss mong at an ideological level.

When I returned to Tatarstan in 2006, I asked some young men about mong and found that, like the women I spoke to, they each shared a personal interpretation of mong’s meanings that reflected who they are as individuals. These young men all consider themselves part of an urban nationalist movement and range in age from their mid-20s to mid-30s. They all grew up in villages and prefer speaking Tatar to Russian and all have university educations. Three are journalists and one is a singer/songwriter musician. Only one of them, whom I barely knew, proved incapable of speaking articulately about mong. The other three men spoke eloquently on the subject.

I interviewed the musician while we were drinking tea at the apartment of one of the journalists. Like the young women in the previous excerpt, the two of them generated a collaborative response. Italics=Tatar; bold=Russian; regular=English.
Musician: In my opinion, mong is something that has come to us preserved from ancient times and an extremely important element in the nation’s genetic makeup. And second, the word mong has commonalities with the blues tradition of blacks living in America. The meaning of the blues is very close to that of mong. Sorrow [mongsulyk]. However, the meaning of the blues emerges from people who migrated to Chicago. It’s from Chicago. Thus, it’s not a village genre. It ends up being an urban genre. It developed its own qualities. And because it’s an urban genre, the blues changed and lost its mongsulyk meaning. Tatars have retained mongsulyk. Some confuse mong with wretchedness [meskenlek]. But it’s important not to confuse the two because pride is a characteristic of mong. In contemporary alternative music we try to preserve mong. New genres are coming into existence, the urban genre is growing. But we try not to lose mong, even though our music is urban….

me: Does mong only belong to music?
M: About music it’s hard to say. Mong is somewhat more fundamental than music. Mong is a spiritual state. It’s very difficult to say. What do you think, abiy?

The musician appealed to the journalist. The journalist formulated his answer in Russian—he and I had done an interview several days previously during which, after five years outside a Tatar-speaking environment, I had had to switch to Russian. While the journalist is fully bilingual, he prefers speaking Tatar.

Journalist: I think that mong is the soul’s, a kind of melancholy, grief, a protest crammed into a melodic form. That’s how it seems to me. That is, people have lived through genocide—Soviet genocide, imperial genocide, and now under…(he chuckled)...and so on. That is, among them a certain—how can I say it?—manifestation of a protest has formed, but it is a cramped protest only understandable by one’s own people. That is, it’s the same. Black people had their own songs, right? They have their ways and we have ours, different because our blood is different after all. Africans are somewhat more hot-blooded and braver, and we are somewhat chilly people. Their songs seem as if they would be more dynamic, while ours would be more melodic.
M: Abiy, I’m going to interrupt you. The music of black people is best when black people play it. Black people know how to play the blues best. White people can’t understand the blues. The same is true for Russians. Russians may be able to play Tatar music note for note. But, there is no mong in their music. They don’t know how to give forth mong. The notes can be very exact, very correct. And there’s no mong. A Tatar feels mong. A Tatar sees it. A Russian doesn’t.

J: That’s your version? That mong and the blues are connected...that the blues are a kind of protest...

M: Yes, yes. They...for us it’s the forest. When people work in the forest they sing like that. African Americans building the railroad, working on the plantations, they sang. It’s called a work song, right? When the blues was created as an urban genre, it lost its mongsulyk.

J: Helen, maybe you can comment. Africans were slaves in America. Can you compare mong and that type of music, the blues? Not their musical notation, but perhaps there is a kind of shared feeling of sorrow, a shared tragedy.

M: It’s not the same sound but we understand the blues at the level of subconscious. Underconscious? (He asked me in English.)

me: Subconscious.

M: Subconscious.

The three of us left the journalist’s apartment and went to the office where the other two journalists work. There I also asked about mong. The first journalist’s response was halting and incomplete. He said:

Mong is voice. It is voice. It is folklore. In order for mong to exist, there must be singing. I can’t say anything specific. I don’t know.

The second journalist jumped in:

As far as I’m concerned, mong is wretchedness [meskenlek]. “Life is difficult. Life is hard and the Tatar is wretched.” People couldn’t sing music with their full voices. They would be found out. But, sometimes, in the mountains, in the middle of the forest, they gave forth song. They were beaten down. They couldn’t give forth their full voice. They gave forth meskenlek. “Tatars are mesken. Black forest, black forest.” That’s what it’s about, right? Now, Tatars feel freer and that’s why mong is disappearing.

Each of the three men who could speak articulately about mong did so from his own unique perspective. The singer/songwriter musician who
had studied the blues found connections between mong and the blues. The journalist who writes articles protesting Russian domination sees mong as a form of cramped protest. And the journalist who lives life as if he were free rejects a form of expression that he considers a sign of subjugation.

The generational transmission of mong to urban Tatars is incomplete. That is, some urban Tatars receive, but are not able to actively manipulate mong’s meanings. Their inability to manipulate mong may stem from needing to “see a lot and live a lot,” before acquiring the wisdom necessary for metadiscourse. Or the cause of their inability may be that they inhabit a world too strongly shaped by russophone culture to allow them to speak eloquently about mong. Others, more deeply embedded in Tatar language in quotidian life, are articulate on the topic of mong, though they may reject what they see as mong’s inherent quality of abjectness. All the same, mong’s prevalence among young, urban Tatars is novel and a result of changes brought about by Tatarstan’s sovereignty project. These changes indicate that the referential and experiential worlds inhabited by people who speak Tatar are becoming increasingly differentiated from those of people who do not speak the language.

Conclusions

Tatars say that mongful songs contain the tragedy of the nation’s history. However, unlike other forms of Tatar verbal expression, mong never refers to the particular events Tatar-speakers avow make their nation’s history a tragic one. Diverse understandings of mong’s meaning allow Tatars to view it from their own individual perspectives, while at the same time promoting feelings of national unity. Indeed, the very inflexibility of mong’s form, as well as the non-specificity of its lyrics, makes for the possibility of multiple interpretations, and notwithstanding this multiplicity, mong as an experience is nearly uniform.

Mong provides a revealing insight into how Tatar emotions are structured. It allows audience members to disconnect their attention from their surroundings and to contemplate the grief-sorrow of their inner worlds. Unlike other Tatar social situations, it is permissible when listening to mongly jyrlar to withdraw your gaze and allow tears to well up in your eyes. Thus, while mong is an intensification of the essence of normative Tatar emotionality, it is also separate from quotidian behavioral norms.

Most importantly, mong demonstrates how Tatar nationalism works. Tatar-speakers almost universally say they experience mong the same way
and consider themselves to be talking about the same phenomenon when they discuss it. At the same time, Tatars use their diverse understandings of mong’s meaning as a platform for expressing the perspectives granted by their social roles and individual personalities. This diversity does not mask a contradiction in Tatar nationalist ideologies, but rather how Tatars experience a feeling of collective inclusiveness while expressing their own individuality. Tatars see no inconsistency in this, considering it both common sense and common knowledge that variation should occur. This belies presumptions that nationalist feelings require uniformity. Indeed, one reason Tatarstan has not suffered the violence that has affected the Baltics, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and other parts of the former Soviet Union since the 1980s is that Tatarstan nationalist ideologies stress collective belonging while allowing for individual variation and underscoring the constant need for peaceful negotiation.

Although mong as a practice is becoming extinct among younger Tatars, it nevertheless has gained ideological currency since the Soviet Union’s collapse. Urban Tatars under 40 years of age, who spend most of their time away from village life, consider mong essential to being Tatar, even though some can say little about it without reverting to speaking in Russian. Surrounded as they are by the Russian language, except when among family members or studying Tatar in the classroom, certain Tatars have difficulty formulating ideas about mong, despite their internalized understanding of it. Other Tatars can speak eloquently about mong, but don’t spend time singing mongful songs. It seems as if, while mong is disappearing as a practice, it is simultaneously assuming greater importance as a trope for being Tatar and may contribute to the continued divergence of Tatarstan’s discursive worlds.

Notes

1 Sometimes these participant roles overlap when singers and listeners are the same people. Folklorist Izaly Zemtsovsky categorically denies that mong is a genre (personal communication). He also notes that mong’s “ancient melodies” are actually contained within modern songs. However, since Tatars consider mong to be a song genre and mongful songs to invoke something ancient, for the purposes of this discussion, I will take them at their word.

2 Thanks to Suzanne Wertheim for first informing me of the blues analogy.

3 For example, Jewish musician Leonid Davidovich, the now-deceased Tatarstan-trained, Russian-speaking leader of Kazan’s klezmer band Simkha spontaneously brought up
mong as a topic, professing experiential knowledge of it, during a 2000 interview in Kazan’s sole restored synagogue.

4 This construction follows a common pattern in Turkic languages for creating abstract nouns in which two words with the same or semantically very close meanings are doubled up. The abstract nouns are frequently created from two different source languages, as is this one, where the first component is Turkic and the second a borrowing from Arabic. Kaygyi xäsrät is the first of five definitions for mong given in Ganiev (2005), the Tatar telenen’an lautmaly süzlege. [Tatar Language Explanatory Dictionary.] The four others are (1) a feeling of the heart [törük xise], deep feeling invoked by tradition [tirän xise]; (2) tune, melody [köi], a collection of feelings [xislär jyelmas]; (3) the meaning of form [räumeh mäg’näse]; (4) (dialect) shortage [kimchelek], deficiency [jiteshsezlek].

5 On the variation of emotion across cultures, see Besnier (2002); Feld (1990); González (2001); Hall and Bucholtz (1995); Lutz and Abu-Lughod (1990); Morgan (2002); O’Nell (1996); Paxson (2005); Schiefflin and Ochs (1986); and Turner (1967), inter alii. See Ries (1997) on Russian litany and lamentation.

6 Goffman (1986[1974]).

7 I refer to Färidä Kudasheva as she asked me, using the Tatar kin-term apa in conjunction with her name.

8 I found out later that this woman was the sister-in-law to the cruise’s organizer and married to a Russian man, who had accompanied her on the cruise several times.

9 As is common practice, the woman inserted the Tatar kin term into her Russian speech.

10 Our turn to sing came as well.

11 Turkic languages do not have gender; thus, I translate the personal pronoun ul as “s/he” and the possessive pronoun anyng as “his or her.”


13 See Chapter 2 for more on the content constraints of expressions made in Kazan’s two major languages.

14 This prohibition is the reason that the professional musicians in pre-Soviet Turkestan (now Central Asia, roughly) were all Jewish.

15 This conversation occurred in December 2000. Kük is an ancient word that signifies the heavens, literally meaning the color turquoise—blue or green, or sometimes grey. Tängre is a pre-Islamic word for god. Chingis Khan worshipped Kük-Tängre, the Sky God. During the post-Soviet period, in Central Asia Tängrism, sometimes called shamanism, is enjoying revival.

16 Social scientists habitually define private and public in this way, leaving little or no room for interstitial collectivist spheres of activity. See Anderson (1991) and Habermas (1989), in particular.

17 The word Sveta apa used for God is Kudai, a loanword from Persian and consequently considered non-denominational in Tatar, as opposed to the Islamic Allah. Similar to Tatar linguistic structure in which there is no gender, i.e., one word [ul] connotes he, she, and it, in Islam, God likewise has no gender.

18 There are of course no hymns in Islam. Sveta apa used the Russian loanword “gym,” which could alternatively be rendered as “anthem.”

19 Her father is deceased.
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20 Baptism is considered a violation among other reasons because baptized Tatars had their names changed to Russian ones and thus lost the ability to identify the patrilineal members of their families.

21 When I pressed the point, Sveta apa said that a mongly jyr about separation could perhaps possibly refer to romantic love.

22 Sveta apa’s exact words were: Ul üze saklap kalgandyr. Bu shu mongly jyrlar belän bälä.

23 Differences in the mechanics of the two interviews provide indicators of differences in the two women’s worldviews, as well as in the extent of our intimacy. The interview with Sveta apa took place in the school where she teaches. We drank tea beforehand and afterwards to frame the transitions to and from the event of the videotaped interview. By contrast, the interview with Hayat apa took place in her apartment in the evening after a dinner during which we had consumed a bottle of wine.

24 Hayat apa’s exact phrase was küp körgän—“having seen a lot and hence grown wise” is how Tatars formulate the experience of long life.

25 Sveta apa is not alone in this thought. For example, a short article that appeared in the Tatar literary journal Miras on the work of 13th–14th century Ottoman poet Yunus Emre contains the word mong in its title, despite the fact that the piece does not concern song or any other conventional manifestation of mong. See Äxmät (1996). Likewise, Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk describes the melancholic emotion of hüzün particular to residents of Istanbul in his memoir Istanbul: Memories and the City.


27 See Pesmen (2001) for an exploration of how Russians in Omsk employ the word dusha to explain their lives. Their commentaries have remarkably little to do with inner worlds and a great deal to do with making sense of exterior circumstances.