Transformation of sacred spaces, pilgrimages and conceptions of hybridity in the Post-Soviet Caucasus

A new research project in Germany (February 2013 – January 2016)

Based at the Department for Caucasus Studies, Friedrich-Schiller-University Jena (Germany) and funded by the Volkswagen Foundation, the purpose of the three-year international research project is to undertake a multi-sited and multi-disciplinary investigation of social functions of sacred sites – shrines, churches, mosques, graves, trees, springs and other types of pilgrimage sites in the contemporary North and South Caucasus. Relying on anthropological and ethno-historical methods, the project aims to collect and analyze long-term ethnographic materials on the transformation of sacred spaces and social networks at selected rural and urban communities in the post-socialist Caucasus. The prominence of shrines and sacred places all over the Caucasus, transcending the nominal religious boundaries of Christianity and Islam, creates a social sphere of interrelated spaces. As a consequence, the investigation of regimes related to shrines, such as offerings or pilgrimages, may provide a corrective to a stereotypical image of the Caucasus as primarily a region of conflict. Special attention is paid to the diversity of narratives about the history and function of sacred sites, their materiality and their associations with other ethnic and religious communities. Sacred spaces under investigation are defined as *ziyara* (Arabic for place of pilgrimage), *pir* (Persian synonym), *salotsavi, xat’i* (Georgian), *matur, surb* (Armenian) and *svyatie mesta* or *svyatilischa* (Russian).

In terms of organizational structure, six teams conduct fieldwork in different regions. The geographical spectrum of selected sites covers both lowland and mountain areas in Armenia, Georgia, Russian Federation (Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria) and Azerbaijan. The following scholars and institutions are involved into the project: Kevin Tuite (University of Montreal), Florian Mühlfried, Tsypylma Darieva (Friedrich Schiller University Jena), Vladimir Bobrovnikov (Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow), Levon Abrahamian (Armenian National Academy of Sciences), Igor Kuznetsov (Center for Pontico-Caucasian Research, Kuban State University, Krasnodar).

Consultants: Bruce Grant (Department of Anthropology, City University of New York), Johanna Nichols (Department of Linguistics, University of California, Berkeley), Silvia Serrano (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences sociales, Paris).

Contact: Friedrich-Schiller-Universität (FSU) Jena, Abteilung für Kaukasiologie, Jenergasse 8, 07743 Jena, Germany, Tel: 03641-944878, 03641-03641/944884, www.kaukasiologie.de; coordinator: Tsypylma Darieva, ts.darieva@uni-jena.de.