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Shirin Akiner, *Religious Language of a Belarusian Tatar Kitab: A Cultural Monument of Islam in Europe*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2009, XXVII+457 pp.[1]

Shirin Akiner's book is a mature, comprehensive study of the nineteenth-century copy of a Belarusian-Polish religious text written in Arabic script, namely a kitab of the Tatars who settled within the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL) in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The author performs an in-depth linguistic analysis of the text against the background of the history of the settlement and origins of these Tatars whom, in view of the text's language, she describes as Belarusian. This is not the only name given to this group of inhabitants of the GDL and later the Commonwealth of many nations. As the extensively cited literature of the subject describes, the terms Lithuanian Tatars, Polish Tatars, and lately increasingly often Polish-Lithuanian Tatars, are also used (Łapicz 1986; Jankowski, Łapicz 2000).

The Tatars who settled in the GDL were of the Golden Horde. They belonged to different Turkish-Mongolian tribes and spoke different dialects, mainly Kipchak dialects. Their main point of commonality was Islam. Their substantial linguistic diversity was one reason for their rapid assimilation into the local population. It is believed that already in the sixteenth century Tatars in the GDL had been completely Slavicized linguistically (Belarusian dialects and regional Polish). That apparent assimilation notwithstanding, they strove to preserve their religious identity. Muslim articles of faith and detailed executive instructions (rituals) were therefore translated into Belarusian and/or Polish (depending on the language situation in the GDL and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth) and written down in the Arabic script as an unequivocal symbol of Muslim unity. The basic religious literature of Lithuanian-Polish (or Belarusian according to Akiner) Tatars comprises translations of the Quran, commentaries on the Quran with quoted excerpts known as *tefsirs* (t´efs`ir), *kitabs* – books representing very diverse content (the articles of faith according to the Quran, rituals, moralistic stories related to the Quran, the lives of the prophets, visions of the end of the world and the last judgment, etc.), and *chamails* – handy, small collections of prayers and rituals of a less official and more practical nature.

Akiner analyses the kitab from the British Library in London (BLK). The volume is not dated. The terminus of the book has been determined as the first half of the nineteenth century, based on a watermark (1831) on the paper used by the copyist. The author had put many difficult hours of effort into painstakingly transliterating the text into Latin script. The entire transliterated text is included on the CD attached to the publication, while selected excerpts from the kitab with brief remarks, under the heading Transliterated Extracts, are printed directly in the book (pp. 369–399). Consequently, readers unfamiliar with the Arabic alphabet are not only able to read the original text; they are also able to gain a better understanding of the author's views or, in some cases, to verify them to some degree as well.

In terms of the work's original semantic interpretation of the kitab's text, what is worth mentioning is the way in which the author aptly notes the great extent to which the language of Islam in the translation has blended with the language of the

1 Shirin Akiner, *Religious Language of a Belarusian Tatar Kitab. A Cultural Monument of Islam in Europe*. With a Latin-Script Transliteration of the British Library Tatar Belarusian Kitab (OR 13020) on CD-ROM, 2009, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, XXVII + 457 pp.

distinct Christian culture of the community into which the Tatars – the users of the text – had been assimilated. This was largely made possible by the fact that both religions are monotheistic. It seems that in some places, especially in the storytelling/moralistic fragments, the sense of the kitab's distinct religious identity becomes vague to a Christian reader.

Being a Slavic linguist, I will not discuss the theological and historical issues (Part II History and Religion, pp. 11–68). It would also be hard for me to offer an opinion on the never easy task of adapting Arabic script to record Slavic sounds.[2] These are difficulties that result primarily from the fact that Arabic has no hard/soft phonological opposition, which on the other hand pervades Belarusian and Polish, and that it has only three vocalization signs where there are at least six Belarusian and Polish vowels. Consequently, for example, the two different Polish lexemes być 'to be'and bić 'to hit' can appear the same – bic – when written down, and only the context indicates which lexeme was intended by the author. Reading the transliteration, one must trust the author, who discusses the rules she followed and who presents equivalents (or the lack thereof) in appropriately structured tables (pp. XXIII–XXVI) and then explains this point in greater detail in chapter III.1.2 Script.

Language of the kitab includes three elements: a Belarusian base (vocabulary, morphology, syntax), Polish language vocabulary and structures, and Turkish terms, including those originating from Arabic and Persian (TAP), introduced wherever the doctrine and rituals of Islam absolutely required this to maintain their distinctness. TAP vocabulary in the BLK accounts for 32.3% of the whole. It is morphologically Slavicized, and it often appears without endings. The author believes it does not imply the presence of vestiges of the Tatars' forgotten languages but it was re-introduced from translated Islamic literature (p. 345). Similar Turkish borrowings can be found in the Belarusian and Polish languages, and are numerous in South Slavic languages. To mark the TAP words, Akiner leaves the Arabic notation next to the transliterated version. At the same time, she observes that Slavic vocabulary filters even into specifically Islamic rituals. She carries out some interesting analyses of semantic changes to Slavic lexemes occurring as a result of the encounter with Islamic notions (examples p. 349).

The Slavic text of the kitab is extremely diverse in terms of the mutual quantitative ratio of Belarusian and Polish language elements. The beginning, for example (7A, lines 1–23), reads like Polish text with negligible Belarusian elements, but by 8A the balance shifts in favor of the Belarusian system. This shifting back and forth recurs several times. In general, however, Belarusian dominates, as illustrated by vocabulary statistics. Among 1,094 words (including alternants and proper nouns), there are 741 (67.7%) Slavic ones. Of these, 467 (63.0%) are shared by Belarusian and Polish, 137 (18.5%) are Belarusian, and 62 (8.4%) are purely Polish. The large number of shared words (63%), the frequent use of parallel phonetic variants of lexemes such as PATNICA Brus. piatnica and PONTEK Pol. piątek 'Friday' (<*ǫ), MAD-/MODLITVA Brus. malitwa, Pol. modlitwa 'prayer' but MALIC Brus. malić 'to entreat', MALICCA Brus. malicca, Pol. modlić się 'to pray' (< *dl), the use of Belarusian inflectional endings with Polish bases and vice versa, the mixing of derivational morphemes, the existence of shared regional

2 In this type of study, transliteration and transcription are seldom distinguished consistently (Łapicz 1986, pp. 90–95). Akiner uses the term transliteration.

features, e.g. Acc.=Nom. of the type: *Oni prośba czynili* (12A), causes the reader to perceive the text as being more mixed than the lexical statistics actually suggest.

This leads us to the fundamental question of whether the Belarusian-Polish mixed text of the kitab is (not counting the TAB) evidence of how the translator (and to some degree the copyist) spoke, or if this is a mannerism applied to written language. The author seems to choose the latter. I, too, could offer logical arguments in favor of this view if it were not for the far-reaching analogies found in mixed texts spoken by bilingual inhabitants of western Belarus who lost their Polish-language competence as a result of changed state borders, who were the subject of a research project in 1997–2007.[3]

To conclude, Akiner's excellent work is not only a cultural monument of Islam in Europe, as its subtitle states; it is also an invaluable resource for studying regional northeastern Polish and the condition of the Belarusian language in the region.

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3 Brasławszczyzna. Pamięć i współczesność. T. I Historia. Charakterystyka socjolingwistyczna. Świadectwo mieszkańców [Braslavshchina. Memory and the Present Day. Vol. 1 History. A Sociolinguistic Characterization. The Inhabitants' Testimony], Warszawa 2011; T. II Słownictwo dwujęzycznych mieszkańców rejonu [Vol. 2 The Vocabulary of the Region's Bilingual Inhabitants], Warszawa 2009. Ed. E. Smułkowa.