

THE SIBERIAN VILLAGE OF OKUNEVO AS A PLACE OF POWER AND ITS SACRED LANDSCAPE

JULIA SENINA

Junior Researcher

European University at Saint Petersburg

6/1A Gagarinskaya st., St. Petersburg 191187 Russia

e-mail: jsenina@eu.spb.ru

ABSTRACT

The paper deals with contemporary places of power and New Age sacred landscapes in Russia.* It focuses on the Siberian village of Okunevo, its sacred sites, and their worshippers. Formation of this place of power was a result of the activity of individuals (both academics and adherents of new religious movements), combined with the specific interpretation of archaeological sites and the natural landscape of the area. The landscape around the village of Okunevo affects the interaction of people with the sacred loci and the ways the signs, symbols and narratives about them are created.

KEYWORDS: New Age • Russia • places of power • Okunevo • Babaji • academic archaeology • natural landscape

Several scholars have argued that travel to sacred sites constitutes an integral part of the New Age spiritual culture (Heelas 1999 [1996]: 2; Ivakhiv 2007: 263; Altglas 2014: 119–165). A ‘place of power’ is an etic and emic term referring to special locations that, due to their perceived spiritual powers, attract visitors, i.e. annual pilgrimages of their followers as well as visits by curious non-followers. They are characterised as places of personal transformation, and pilgrimages to them are considered the means to achieve such transformation. Places of power can be natural or cultural sites, i.e. those valued mainly for their natural features and those that are valued for their effect on local culture, built structures and their age-old human uses. The last category includes mountains, unusual rock formations, spectacular lakes and canyons, waterfalls and hot springs, and other natural landscapes that are characterised by some outstanding quality. Prime examples of natural places of power are mounts Shasta, Fuji and Kailash, the Sedona area of Arizona, the Haleakala Crater in Hawaii and Lake Titicaca in Peru (Ivakhiv 2007: 263–267). As noted by the American scholar Adrian Ivakhiv (*ibid.*: 266), such places are “believed by many to harbour ‘Earth energies’ of some sort energies which are thought to be beneficial and health-promoting in their effects and catalytic to spiritual growth”.

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Another category of places of power includes cultural structures, such as archaeological sites, ancient megalithic structures, and others. The most famous sites considered special by New Age followers are Machu Picchu, Stonehenge and the Great Pyramid of Giza. Cultural places of power are usually associated with cultural traditions much older than Western civilisation linked to ideas about the Golden Age (Hammer 2003: 95) – a time when the inhabitants of the Earth had a single truth and a harmony with nature. Sources that identify or justify places of power in this case are esoteric texts, often using quasi-scientific arguments, special guides, visual images, etc. (Ivakhiv 2007: 267–270). Often, the attractiveness of places of power for a large number of spiritual seekers becomes the basis for establishing a tourism business, especially esoteric tourism or ecotourism. A popular example of revitalising an ancient cultural structure as a place of power and creating a network of esoteric tourism is the archaeological complex of Machu Picchu, Peru. Canadian researcher Alexandra Arellano explores the phenomenon of secular pilgrimage to Machu Picchu power places and argues that the tourist is in search of a lost immobility, found in the perceived authenticity of the vagabond (the lost Inca, the indigenous people of the Andes). Arellano demonstrates that new alternative forms of travel to Machu Picchu are based on the typical New Age ideas about the sacredness of nature and the special status of ancient cultures that existed during the so-called Golden Age. An essential component of this practice is the desire for personal transformation, that is, spiritual development, which is facilitated by a temporary rejection of the urban lifestyle and familiarisation with nature, as well as the ‘wisdom’ of people who created the architectural complexes considered sacred and authentic. (Arellano 2007: 89–97)

Perhaps the most anthropologically studied place of power is the small town of Glastonbury in Somerset, England (Ivakhiv 2001; Prince and Riches 2001; Bowman 2005; 2006; 2012). With a permanent population of only about 9,000 Glastonbury occupies a unique position in the spiritual and spatial imagination of a range of religious believers. This small town in Somerset gained wide popularity as a result of spiritual prominence in the wake of religious experimentation and speculation inspired by such diverse influences as Christianity, Theosophy, the Celtic Revival, assorted New Religious Movements, Paganisms and New Age (Bowman 2012: 141). Glastonbury’s current status as a sacred space is based on both the history of the town and its new mythology. Thus, in the Middle Ages, a magnificent Abbey, located in Glastonbury, became one of the most significant British pilgrimage destinations and remained so until its dissolution in 1539 as part of the Reformation. Despite the Abbey’s demise, people continued to be drawn to the town; and throughout the 20th century Glastonbury attracted increasingly numerous and varied spiritual seekers (Bowman 2006: 123). Spiritual seekers attribute different meanings to the town depending on their belief in a particular legend and their religious beliefs. As a result, Glastonbury has a special significance and a sacred status to the variety of vernacular Christian traditions, with the myth of St Joseph of Arimathea becoming a cornerstone to many other legends. Glastonbury is also considered by various believers as the Isle of Avalon, the site of a great Druidic centre of learning, a significant prehistoric centre of the worship of a local Goddess, the ‘cradle of English Christianity’, the ‘New Jerusalem’, a communication point for alien contact, the epicentre of New Age in England, and the ‘heart chakra’ of planet Earth (*ibid.*).

Typologically similar to Glastonbury is the place of power in Sedona, a small town in Arizona, USA, which, unlike the cultural-oriented English town can be attributed to a natural place of power (Foust et al. 1991; Ivakhiv 2001; 2003; Coats 2009). Sedona is an 'oasis' community of some 16,000 people located 119 miles north of Phoenix, Arizona, and 114 miles south of the Grand Canyon. It sits in the high desert region of the Verde Valley, at the base of Oak Creek Canyon, with the limestone cliffs of the Colorado Plateau forming the north side of the city. Sedona is situated in and around the Coconino National Forest. In fact, nearly half of the city's 19 square miles is publicly owned, which as Curtis Coats claims lends to Sedona's reputation as rural, rugged, and pristine (Coats 2009: 383). The main legitimising discourse of the sacredness of Sedona was spread in New Age culture about 'energies' that emanate from the red rocks and the Earth and are transformed into famous 'energy vortexes' that become an established feature of the city's tourist industry. Every year, Sedona attracts about 4–5 million tourists and competes with the Grand Canyon for the status of the most popular attraction in Arizona. Although the Metaphysical community constitutes a not particularly powerful minority of the city's population, as noted by Ivakhiv (2001: 173), much of Sedona's global reputation stems from its celebrity status in the New Age and alternative spirituality movements.

In Russia, the appearance of places of power is associated with the desecularisation of the beginning of the post-Soviet period. Since that time in addition to the Russian Orthodox Church and Protestant movements (predominantly Pentecostal), a multitude of new and diverse religious movements, spiritual teachings, and practices that are commonly referred to as New Age have begun to emerge in the Ural Mountains and Siberia. The choice of these regions is not accidental, as they are widely believed to be places where one can find sources of non-confessional mystical inspiration or even a new promised land (Shtyrkov 2015: 65). Among the important centres in the Urals, eastern and southern Siberia the most famous are the settlement of the disciples of Vissarion Christ in the south of the Krasnoyarsk region (Panchenko 2011), the site of the presumed 'Shambala' in Altai, allegedly found by Nikolay Roerich (1874–1947) in the Uimon Valley, the archaeological site of Arkaim, the ancient settlement in the Chelyabinsk Region (Shnirel'man 2011), and the village of Okunevo in the Omsk region, where I conducted field research in August 2019.

In this article I will examine the sacred landscape of one of the most popular places of power in Siberia, Russia, which, like Glastonbury and Sedona, not only attracts annual pilgrimages, but also became a permanent living place for the spiritual seekers of various radical religious movements. The aim of my study is to explore how the place of power has been formed around the village of Okunevo and what part do archaeological sites, the natural landscape and myth-making play in this process.

My fieldwork in Okunevo village was carried out in August 2019 during research for my master's thesis *Sacred Space in the Area of Village Okunevo in Muromtsevsky District of Omsk Region: History and Modernity* (Senina 2020). During the included observation, I made 41 interviews lasting from 12 minutes to 5 hours, 34 of which were recorded on audio media. My informants were both permanent residents and guests of the village for a limited time.

The village of Okunevo is located 240 km to the north of the city of Omsk. It currently belongs to the Muromtsevsky district of the Omsk region, while administratively it belongs to the Bergamak rural settlement. The population of the whole district, and the village, has been declining since the 1990s. According to the 2010 Census the population of Okunevo is 265 permanent residents, however, during the summer season the number of its residents can more than double, while in winter it sometimes reduces to 100–150 people (Census 2010). Within the territory of Okunevo there are three officially registered religious organisations, the Babajist community, the local branch of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) and the Russian Orthodox community, and at least five non-registered religious groups with no consistent ideology or set of practices. These religious groups are identified primarily through their ideologies, which in Okunevo can be divided into those gravitating towards Hinduism, Krishnaism, Paganism, Orthodox and, to a lesser extent, Islam. The set of practices of religious groups overlaps, such as meditation or walking on coals, but their dogmas and prayer texts are specific.

At the beginning of the Russian colonisation of Siberia this territory was part of the Siberian khanate inhabited by Turkic-speaking tribes of the so called Tara Tatars. A number of Turkic geographical names still exists, for example, the name of the local river Tara, the names of the villages Intsiss, Bergamak, etc. The arrival of Russians in the Tara valley led to the foundation of the town of Tara (1594), which became a stronghold in the centre of the Tatar settlement area and a starting point in the development of the vast arable territories of the Tara region (or Pitar'e). Between 1670 and the 1690s a dozen villages appeared in the area. One of them was Okunevo, originally named Rezino after its founder, a serviceman who became its first settler (Sigutov 1994: 6–8). The village later expanded and merged with another small village nearby and the new settlement was called Okunevo. During the Soviet period Okunevo was under the administration of the Muromtsevsky District Bergamak Village Council and its residents worked for various regional factories and plants or were employed by collective farms that later became state farms. In 2019 as part of my fieldwork I surveyed the local residents and heard their fond memories of Soviet-era stability and prosperity and how it sharply contrasted with their current lifestyle. My older informants told me that in the past the village had owned several herds of cows and sheep as well as herds of horses, and that the village had its own primary and secondary schools, a paramedic station, an obstetrician and a post office. In the post-Soviet period the only remaining establishments supporting the everyday life of the permanent residents were two village stores, located in the close vicinity of each other and called The Brick Store and The Wooden Store.

The Start of the New Era in Okunevo

The discovery of Okunevo as a place of power and attribution of an outstanding spiritual significance and special value to the area happened in 1991, when followers of the Babaji religious teachings arrived in the remote Siberian village. Sri Heyrakhan Vale Baba, or Babaji (b. unknown–1984) was a founder of the neo-Hindu spiritual move-

ment. Between 1970 and 1984 he lived in the Kumaon region of India. The main doctrinal text of the babajists is the *Teachings of Babaji*, which is a collection of Babaji's sayings combined with the speeches that Babaji's follower and teacher Shastriji made on his behalf. The *Teachings* were recorded and in some cases recovered during Babji's life at the ashram in Kheirakhan. A fragment of one of the teachings dated May 5, 1982 states that somewhere in Siberia there is a temple complex dedicated to Hanuman, a zoomorphic monkey-like deity revered in Hinduism, and that in the future there will be a global catastrophe that will destroy everything on Earth except Russia (Devi 1990: 48). This particular text from the teachings of Babaji has probably prompted Babaji's followers to search for the temple of Hanuman in Siberia, which, in turn, started a new era in Okunevo's history. Babaji's successor Muniraji appointed his follower Rasma Rosite to find the temple complex in Siberia. Initially Rosite was not enthusiastic about the idea of moving to Siberia and perceived it as exile, although she later rose to the challenge and submitted to the Teacher's will (Doroshenko 2001: 2).

Rasma Rosite (b. 1944) known by her spiritual name Rajni, is a Babaji follower of Latvian origin. She came to the Kheirakhan ashram from Germany. Information on Rosite's past prior to her service to Babaji is scarce. According to the periodicals of the early 1990s she was born in Latvia, from where her family fled at the end of the WWII settling in West Germany. After finishing a German Latvian gymnasium Rosite studied theology in a German university and then moved into the studies of spiritual practices (Mach 2006). She married a university lecturer who shared her interest in spiritual advancement, however their union did not last. According to Rosite her husband did not share her passion for spiritual practices and her choice of Babajism as the Way of Life. He "did not dare to go as far". They parted ways and in 1983 Rosite went to India. (Shteyn 2006: 6) In an interview with the Omsk TV channel, Rosite claimed that it was Babaji himself who appeared in her dream and ordered her to come to Kheirakhan. Rosite stayed in the ashram for seven years, in her first year meeting Babaji, who was still alive at the time.

In her interview Rosite emphasised that at the beginning she had no finances to fulfil the mission bestowed upon her by Muniraji. At that time, in the late 1980s, even obtaining an entry visa to Russia was a complicated process. However supported by numerous favourable circumstances, signs and coincidences she managed to overcome the difficulties and started visiting Russia. Rosite mentioned in her interviews that prior to visiting Russia she had another mission assigned to her by Muniraji, which was to go to various countries of the former USSR and spread the knowledge of Babaji's teachings. According to Rosite she had visited 18 places with that mission (ibid.: 6). It is likely that the proselytising activities were not as successful as planned and for that reason they were abandoned. Rosite herself described her travels in post-Soviet countries as a part of her journey to Siberia, which became her main mission.

Rosite's first visit to Russia took place in 1991 when she came to the Moscow Raja and Buddhi Yoga School of Vladimir Antonov (born 1946), where she found support and assistance for her challenging mission. According to one of Antonov's students and Rasma's associate, in the first years of her stay in Russia two students from the Moscow Raja and Buddhi Yoga School became close to Rosite. They followed her back to Kheirakhan and became the first Russians to visit Babaji's ashram. Later students from the Moscow School helped Rosite set up the ashram in Okunevo and became the

first residents there. While still in Moscow, Rosite began to actively search for a place in Siberia where the temple of Hanuman may have been located. The Omsk archaeologists Albert Polevodov and Sergey Tikhonov recalled that six months prior to Rosite's arrival in Omsk the ancient temple was first mentioned at the Omsk State University (OmSU) methodological seminar of archaeologists (Tikhonov 1994). Professor Vladimir Matyushchenko of the OmSU (1928–2005), the leading figure in the Omsk archaeological circles in the 1990s, asked the audience if any of them had in the past come across the remains of an ancient temple. He further explained to the audience that the query had originally come from the fellow Moscow archaeologists searching for any information on the remains of Hindu temples in the Irtysh region (Priirtysh'e). Less than a year later, in the early summer of 1992, Rosite visited the Omsk Regional Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography. She was accompanied by Yelena, who was a student of the Moscow Raja and Buddhi Yoga School and assisted Rosite as an interpreter, since Rosite did not speak Russian at the time. Vladimir Yashin, an Omsk historian who later became one of Rosite's main companions in the search for the temple and who, to some extent, is a co-creator of Okunevo mythology, recalled that a whole "chain of coincidences" (Lifant'yeva 2008: 5) led Rosite to Okunevo. For example, an influential Omsk entrepreneur "known in esoteric circles", who was in Moscow at the time, helped Rosite to come to Omsk (*ibid.*). In Omsk Rosite met with the local archaeologists, who were at the time engaged in archaeological excavations in the Okunevo area. The archaeologists informed her about their findings and took Rosite to the excavation site. At the beginning of her quest Rosite was also aided by the Omsk branch of the Siberian Roerich society. The idea of finding a sacred centre like Shambhala in Siberia would certainly appeal to them.

Having visited the archaeological site, Rosite in her own words "received" the divine revelation that the temple of Hanuman was indeed located there. As a result of the revelation Rosite founded an ashram in Okunevo and started to 'revive' the ancient Vedic traditions. Why was the follower of Babajism drawn to a rural village in Omsk region? There may be several possible explanations. The most common one is often mentioned by Rosite herself as well as the locals and is based on a direct, albeit somehow naive interpretation of the etymology of local place names. Thus, the first two letters in the name of the city of Omsk is associated with the sacred sound in the Hindu tradition, symbolising the vibrations of the creation of the universe and the manifestation of the Creator (Spiridonov 1993: 5). Tara, the name of the local river and the town, has been linked by the Babaji followers to the Sanskrit name of the Hindu mother goddess, the embodiment of femininity and fertility. In addition the word Tara is used in Sanskrit for Polaris, or the North Star, thus associating the place with the North and providing associations with the North Star, the main navigation symbol in the northern Hemisphere (Yashin 1994: 90). Some sources indicate (Shnirel'man 2015: 515) that another reason that prompted Rosite to search for a temple complex in the Omsk region could be the similarity between the name of the God Hanuman with the combined names of Khanty and Mansi, two small North Russian indigenous groups. This hypothesis does not sound credible because the two aforementioned ethnicities reside predominantly outside the Omsk region. In addition to etymology, Rosite had repeatedly outlined that it were the visions of psychics and their extrasensory perceptions that helped her pinpoint the original location of the Hanuman temple (Doroshenko 2001).

There might be another reason for Rosite's decision to link the Hanuman Temple with Okunevo, specifically the activities of the Omsk archaeologists in the area. New religions frequently develop theologies that interact with archaeological material and offer interpretations of archaeological phenomena that are at variance with secular scholarly orthodoxies (Cusack 2010: 765). Clear examples of new religious movements associated with the interpretation of the facts of archaeological science are the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) (Nuckolls 2010), contemporary Goddess spirituality (Rountree 2010), and New Age engagement with channelled beings and the lost continent of Atlantis (Cusack 2010: 785–791). In New Age culture places of power are identified using the concepts of the Golden Age period and are often linked to ancient archaeological monuments. This approach is typical of all New Age spiritual movements both in Russia and abroad (Lewis 2012). The most famous examples in Russia are the dolmens of the Krasnodar territory (Andreyeva 2014; Tyukhtayev 2018) and Arkaim, a fortified middle Bronze Age settlement in the Chelyabinsk region (Shnirel'man 2011). The Okunevo area is another example of a complex and ongoing dialogue between alternative religionists and academic archaeologists.

Archaeological monuments surrounding the village of Okunevo – or as they are called in the archaeological literature the Okunev Archaeological Microdistrict (hereinafter AMR), which comprises part of the so-called Nizhnetarsky AMR – have been excavated and studied for more than 80 years. No other AMR of the middle (Omsk) Irtysh region (also called Priirtysh'e) has acquired as many academic and non-academic publications, although overall the Okunev AMR archaeological monuments are not unique as similar monuments have been unearthed in the Murlin and Ust-Tar AMRs (Konikov et al. 2012: 86). The Okunev AMR covers an area of several square kilometres and to date 27 monuments spanning from the Neolithic period to the late Middle Ages have been identified. The central sacred place for the village and the main place of pilgrimage is located outside the village at Tatarsky Uval. In the archaeological literature, it is called Okunevo V, or “the cape of the second over-floodplain terrace, located at the convergence of the Tara and Irtysh floodplains” (Tolpeko 2015: 71). In the 1990s this historical monument was identified as a cult place by Matyushchenko (1997: 87) and that interpretation provided the academic basis and became the starting point for the sacralisation of the area surrounding Okunevo. Although his views are not shared by most of the researchers working in the Okunev AMR¹ and their opinions regarding purposes and functions of the place vary, Babaji followers use Matyushchenko's interpretation of the Tatar Uval as a historical cult place as proof that their ancient temple complex indeed existed there, which, in turn, provides them the legality to demand the revival of religious activities in that place.

Babaji followers and Omsk archaeologists concur in their vision of western Siberia as an important place in the history of the ancient Aryans. According to Babaji's successor Sri Muniraja, Russia and specifically its northern part was the original dwelling place of the legendary Rishis who wrote the sacred Vedas and brought them to India. Siberia was considered the most sacred place by the Babajists, for this was the place where, according to Rosite, “the ancient temple of Hanuman stood, and the events described in the Ramayana epic took place” (Bkharat 2003). Rosite's views on Siberia, however unor-

thodox, did not seem implausible to the Omsk archaeologists. They corresponded with the ideas of Matyushchenko, who later became friends with Rosite. Matyushchenko (1999: 6) considered the south west of Siberia as the territory of origination of “the farmers-and-herdsmen community with a highly developed bronze casting industry [...] and of the ancient Indo-Aryan epic *Mahabharata*”. It was “the cradle of the Indo-Aryans, some of whom later migrated to South Asia, to the Hindustan subcontinent” (ibid.). In 1990 Matyushchenko’s student Yashin, who introduced Rosite to Okunevo and travelled with her to the site that was later to become the sacred space, defended his PhD thesis on the identification of Indo-Iranian (Aryan) elements in the mythology of the Ugric peoples of western Siberia as a result of contacts that happened between the Bronze Age and the early Iron Age (Yashin 1990).

While Rosite searched for the location of the ancient temple it was the Omsk archaeologists who introduced her to a remote village in the north of the Omsk region. Academic interpretations of the historical monuments and the findings in the Okunevo archaeological complex became for numerous spiritual seekers not only a scientific basis proving the existence of the ancient temple, but also a perennial narrative uniting and reconciling different religious trends (Hammer 2003: 35). According to this view an ancient Vedic civilisation existed in Siberia, particularly in the Omsk region. In other words, to justify the sacredness of Okunevo territory religious beliefs were legitimised through academic discourse, i.e. using the results of archaeological research. These justification attempts were further facilitated by close interaction between spiritual seekers and the Omsk archaeological academic environment.

The Sacred Landscape of Okunevo

There are seven streets in today’s Okunevo: Central (*Tsentrāl’naya*), Brick (*Kirpichnaya*), Green (*Zelenaya*), Peace (*Mira*), Forestry (*Lesnaya*), Mill (*Mel’nichnaya*) and Roadside (*Pridorozhnaya*). Some of the streets have local as well as official names. Central Street is also called Sandy (*Pesochnaya*) due to its sand covering, or Indian after the NeoShiwaite ashram. Brick Street is commonly referred to as Karabakh by local residents, since it is mainly inhabited by the Tatars who moved here in 1986 from the neighbouring burnt down village of Yurt-Bergamak. The Tatar relocation coincided with the military conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the territory of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, which caused clashes between the newcomers and local residents, as well as between the displaced Tatars and the Russian population of Okunevo. Peace Street is sometimes called Grave (*Mogil’naya*) Street due to its past use as a way to the local cemetery. Central Street is the longest of all, running through the entire village; part of it lies on the steep bank of the Tara River. The river is a natural boundary between the forest-steppe and the sub-taiga zones, and the whole area surrounding the village is rich in forests. Within seven to ten kilometres of the village on the border with the Novosibirsk region there is a cluster of four lakes: Danilovo, Shchuchye, Linevo and Shaitan (or Devi). The lakes are usually included in the general narrative about Okunevo.

For all the beauty of the local vistas, Okunevo is not a typical naturally occurring place of power, as it does not have an evident natural anomaly (Ivakhiv 2001: 49). There is nothing unusual or striking in the landscape surrounding the village with its fields

and mixed forests; it is common for the northern part of the Omsk region where the forest-steppe blends with taiga. The village itself stretches along the bank of the winding river Tara, which creates numerous turns and bends and appears muddy and shallow. In Okunevo and nearby in the summer months the river can easily be crossed on foot, though in some places the banks rise high and steep, which turns them into excellent vantage points popular with both residents and tourists for the views.

OMKAR

The main venerated places of power are located outside the village (see Photo 1). The most famous of them is the central site, so called OMKAR, also known as 'the Earth Navel' and 'the Earth Energy Centre'. The site is marked with a small Russian Orthodox chapel of Archangel Michael, a Russian Orthodox cross, a stone Dhuni Hindu altar and a pillar, crowned with the pagan sign of Kolovrat, all erected in close proximity to each other 1.5 kilometres (an average 20-minute walk) northwest of the village, in the Tatar Uval, at the site of the aforementioned Okunevo V archaeological monument.

Now the proximity of many shrines in one space causes neither serious dispute nor conflict. However, this was not always the case. The main conflict over challenging the symbolic presence at OMKAR occurred between representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church and representatives of new religious movements. The first visit of church hierarchs, headed by the archbishop himself, dates to August 1993 (Shnirel'man 2015: 516), the time when the newly formed community of Babajists was celebrating Navaratri for a period of several years. On this visit, on OMKAR a pillar with the Om sign was destroyed, the Hindu altar of Dhuni was broken and a massive Orthodox cross was installed, which is still located on the cult site. Followers of the Russian Orthodox Church perceived the presence of other religious symbols on OMKAR as blasphemy. But by 2010, harsh criticism and aggression towards the activities of new religious movements had been replaced by peaceful missionary activities during significant events in Okunevo, for example, the Solstice.

The local mythology, which serves as a primary source of knowledge regarding the sacred spaces around the village, declares OMKAR as the site where Rosite experienced Divine Revelation in 1992. Archaeology provides further proof of the sacred status of



Photo 1. OMKAR with the Hindu altar Dhuni and a pillar crowned with the neopagan Kolovrat. Photograph by Julia Senina, 2019.

the site. The Tatar Uval, where Omkar is located, is a hill on the steep bank of the Tara River. According to archaeological data (Matyushchenko and Polevodov 1994: 3), it has been used throughout millennia as a local necropolis. Numerous objects and burials were unearthed there dating from the Neolithic Era to the late Mediaeval period. Due to the importance of academic findings in justification of the sacred nature of the site the majority of spiritual seekers living in Okunevo, as well as visiting pilgrims and tourists acquired in-depth knowledge of scientific terminology and scattered archaeological facts linked to the place. One of the people I interviewed, named Irina, who comes to Okunevo in summer to work in the gift shop of a neo-pagan farmstead, told us that the Tatar Uval is a necropolis, and that the ditches surrounding the hill are in fact mounds excavated by archaeologists. In Irina's words Omkar and the necropolis prompted her to discover her ancestral memory and remember an ancient, now forgotten language. Irina strongly believed that her deep connection with those buried at Omkar allowed her to see her past incarnations and gain knowledge of the ancient language, and the archaic nature of the language shows its link to the prehistoric events that once took place at this locum. For the spiritual seekers of all denominations the main argument in favour of the sacredness of the place is that Okunevo V is a territory where thousands of years ago people performed religious activities. In their study Aleksandr Seleznev and Irina Aleksandrovna Selezneva provide an example of how academic information about the cult nature of some archaeological findings is used by spiritual seekers to prove their point. According to them, in 2014 a pillar was erected at Omkar with a sign explaining the "symbol of faith of the inter-religious association" (Seleznev and Selezneva 2016: 81):

OMKAR SHIVA DHAM – MEANS THE PLACE WHERE CREATION BEGAN. Archaeological excavations on the Tatar Uval led by Professor Matyushchenko confirmed that the picturesque right bank of the Tara River had been, since ancient times, a place of worship for many nations who lived here. Now the Omkar Shiva Dham community conducts in this place a revived Babaji fire ritual – HAVAN (YAJNA), which was first created by the ancient Rishis to purify the environment.

At the time of my fieldwork, the sign was no longer there, but as per my observations, many residents and visitors to Okunevo were more or less aware of its content related to the mythology of space. However calling this text a "symbol of faith" was not correct. The text refers to a scientific fact, acknowledged in the archaeological literature, which mentions the highly respected professor Matyushchenko (appeal to authority) and finishes with a reference to the Babajists ritual activities. It does not explicitly state the continuity of cult activities at this site from ancient times to the present day. In oral conversations and interviews such continuity is usually expressed more precisely and is linked to the concept of perennialism, i.e. the view that the area around the village of Okunevo had been a place of ancient tradition, the source of a single esoteric truth.

Some studies of Okunevo describe the daily practices that take place at Omkar as following: "The Russian Old Believers² pray at Omkar in the morning, followed by the Russian Orthodox, followed by the Krishna devotees, who sing there for half a day" (Golovneva and Schmidt 2015: 57). My observations, however, did not confirm that this was the case. The site of Omkar serves daily as the main place of power for pilgrims and

tourists, but not for the Okunevo locals. Thus, the local Russian Orthodox community has erected a small church of the Holy Spirit Descending on the Apostles on their own land and uses it for their daily services and prayers. Their followers rarely visit Omkar. On the other hand, the Babajists usually perform their ceremony Havan (or Yagya), the fire ritual described on the sign, at their Dhuni altar at Omkar rather than at the ashram, while both the Hare Krishna and the Vedic Orthodox followers perform the rituals at Omkar on their main holidays. Babajists also use their site at Omkar every day during the 11 days of Navaratri³ Khawan⁴, when the festive procession comes from the village to the Tatar Uval, led by one of the followers carrying a photo of Babaji.

For pilgrims and tourists, a visit to Omkar is a highlight in their visit to the Okunevo places of power. The place is so widely known that even on Google maps the territory of Tatar Uval is shown as a place of pilgrimage. Over the course of five days I spent several hours daily observing the events at Omkar at different times of the day. During this period, the main visitors to the sacred place were pilgrims and tourists, especially at weekends when a significantly increased influx of people came from the city to the village. I noted that there were no particular rules or order to the ritual practices on Omkar, and this led to a variety of behaviours at the site of worship. Thus, people would routinely cross themselves before entering the Orthodox Chapel of Archangel Michael and when standing before the Orthodox Cross, some people touched the Orthodox Cross with their foreheads. When coming to the Dhuni altar the visitors would sit in the Lotus position, their eyes closed and their hands joined in front of them. The pagan pillar that is topped with the Kolowrat has a bell attached to it and visitors would ring the bell and tie ribbons to the surrounding trees. Evidently, these procedures appeared of minimal importance to Omkar visitors, their main goal being the visit itself. They perceived Omkar as a place that performed their 'purification', provided them with the opportunity to 'drink the energy' and interact with the sacred locus, which was the Earth Navel and the Earth Energy Centre. Most of the visitors were attracted to Omkar because they believed in invisible energies and in a specific 'fine level' Earth energy field, and Omkar for them was a place where those exclusive energies and energy fields affect people by healing, transforming, inspiring them, etc.

One entry from my field diary illustrates a fairly common idea that Omkar is a place of miracles, abnormality, magic, and has a special status as a place of power:

I was at Omkar when there was nobody there except for a chipmunk, when an older couple appeared. The woman was enthusiastically telling her male partner that she had once visited this site with Rasma Rosite and that there was an ancient city here. They asked me to take their photograph and we started talking. The woman came from Omsk and her companion from Magnitogorsk. She insisted on him visiting the site because he was, as she called it, a 'Doubting Thomas'. The woman told us about her past experience when she stood at that site with Rosite in 2009. "We saw a column of the fire energy, and we saw that we were all connected with glowing threads, many of us saw the fireballs. After that experience many people from our group started to write poetry, and one woman whom we met in the hospital [following the experience] started to treat unwell people with music. [...] On Shaitan lake, not a single mosquito would bite us, there is a 'dead' power there, and here there is life and the mosquitos attacked us like mad". (Field diary, August 5, 2019)

My interviewee describes the mystical experience she experienced in 2009 using exactly the same images that are contained in the main local legend about the discovery of Okunevo by Rasma Rosite: pillar of energy fire, fireballs linked with various light phenomena. The theme of the revealed abilities and talents is important. Similarly to the case of Irina, who, after visiting Omkar, discovered ancestral memory and knowledge of an ancient language, in this case one person from the group discovered her talent of healing, and others suddenly became gifted at writing poetry. Miracles and anomalies in the Omkar space often take a physical form, for example, they can be seen as unusual light phenomena in photographs:

Overall, here, you know, Omkar does some amazing things, such photos, and such things happen here! You have no idea. Yes, the comprehension depends on the advancement level [of the person] for some reason. Exactly that – one camera can take the picture and the other camera cannot. Last year we had a group visiting, husband and wife and her sister. They were staying there. On the photos: she's alive, her husband is dead, staying next to her, blue and black, can you imagine? Actually, it's a very nice photo [laughs]. And in another photo a butterfly was glowing at her neck, [something] in the shape of a butterfly, all eaten up by worms, they were so pink, disgusting. A Goodness knows what bulging out like that. And then at some point, imagine, this thing came out, it was not visible. They show it to her, but she doesn't see it. They came back this year, and the [last] photos are just unbelievable. They showed some entities there, I don't know what they are at all. At the same time another camera, Luda's, [a woman from the Orthodox community] showed these glowing plasmoids, they are everywhere here. And they showed the plasmoids, the glow, and the icon of this ... Saint Panteleimon. (FM 2019: Irina, apx. 50)

Plasmoids mentioned by my interviewee, are supposedly some sort of the light phenomenon that uses UFO terminology. They are considered an unknown form of life, most likely extra-terrestrial, which manifests itself in the form of light phenomena.

TYUP

On the opposite side of the village, to the East, there is another 'conventional' place of power – Tyup (see Photo 2). The name Tyup is apparently a local toponym that was used by residents long before the village gained its immense popularity. According to the dictionary of Russian folk dialects, the word Tyup means a peninsula at the bend of a river, or "islets between the river bends" (Skoroletov 2013: 28). The territory of Tyup is essentially a peninsula with three sides surrounded by the River Tara; on the map it has the shape of the omega sign. As with Omkar, a visit to Tyup is an essential part of the tour around the famous and unique places in the area. For example, this is what one of the travel companies writes on their website: "The Okunevo Village sightseeing tour (we visit Omkar and Tyup, and walk through the village)" (see *Derevnya Okunevo*). At the entrance to the omega-shaped Tyup area there is a sign stating that the area is private territory and driving a vehicle into it or drinking alcohol there are forbidden. The sign further states that this is a "sacred place" (sic). For the local residents, Tyup is

a natural cattle pen since three sides of the vast territory are surrounded by a winding river, and the side connecting it with the mainland and the village is fenced. For spiritual seekers, however, Tyup has a number of other purposes. It should be outlined that, unlike Omkar, Tyup has gained popularity mainly with pilgrims and tourists, while religious followers of various denominations local to Okunevo neither engage in ritual practices at Tyup nor have their places of worship there.



Photo 2. The idol of the goddess Tara at the power place Tyup. Photograph by Julia Senina, 2019.

Like Omkar, Tyup is located in the bend of the River Tara, but unlike Omkar it sits on the opposite part of the bend. Tyup is the second most popular place of power after Omkar and spiritual seekers often compare them. Tyup is usually considered the opposite to Omkar, with the latter having light or positive energies while the former is associated with low, dark, and even negative energies.

The scenery at both places enhances the perceived association with certain types of energy: Omkar is located on a hill rising over and above the surrounding area, which is covered in mixed forests. By contrast Tyup is a lowland area covered in grass, with a small copse of twisted and mangled willow trees growing at its centre. According to various versions, the mangled willows were struck by lightning, or suffered from bush fire, or were hit by a meteorite, or they were just unable to withstand the force of the energy. The copse of willow trees forms an ellipse, and inside the ellipse there is a round footpath that is never overgrown with grass and is known as the witch's circle. Various reasons are cited to explain why the circled path with a diameter of about 10 meters does not get overgrown: according to some, it is caused by cattle that

for some reason walks there in a circles, while others believe the path appeared as a result of some mystical rituals. Contrary to Omkar, Tyup has a more defined set of ritual rules for pilgrims and tourists. The widely used rule states that to “purify and harmonise your inner energy, you need to make three full anti-clockwise circuits along the “witch’s circle”. Another way to achieve the same goal is to meditate in the centre of the circle and to tie ribbons to the branches of the mangled willow trees. The same concept of special invisible energies is used when describing the unique essence of both Omkar and Tyup sites, however the extraordinary energy of the latter is additionally linked to the surrounding landscape, i.e. the big loop of the River Tara that surrounds the peninsula.

I interviewed Aleksander Petrov, the founder of the Academy of Life and administrator of the most popular group on Okunevo in the Russian social network *Vkontakte*, who in the past was a well-known public figure in Novosibirsk and worked for the Department of Information and Measuring Technology at the Novosibirsk State Technical University. Aleksander provided his expert explanation on the extranormal energy of Tyup:

Since there are loops on the River Tara, 15 loops in a row here, you can look up them on the map, use Yandex or any other [map provider]. The difference of this place from other rivers is clearly seen, in this part the river makes a lot of those almost closed loops, especially where Tyup is, it is so curved there. two km... six km around, we used a boat, we got on the boat in one place and sailed to another place and there is a small isthmus there. During floods the isthmus goes under the water and the site becomes an island. It is no longer a Tyup peninsula, but becomes an island, in spring that is, when there is plenty of water. With each configuration of this type, each loop, it means that water surrounds the land [unintelligible], and as water conducts electric current, a magnetic flow is created, which penetrates... The Earth’s magnetic field or the solar magnetic field, especially when magnetic storms happen, the spots appear there, the protuberances [dense condensation of relatively cold matter] emitted by the Sun... This is where the Earth’s magnetic field and the solar magnetic field make their impact, and the Moon as well. [The effect] of the stars is very small... Of course, there is some effect, and the Parade of Planets also, but this is negligible, much less than the Earth or solar field. So. The magnetic field that fluctuates inside such configurations, in each loop, it gets shielded. [...] Water is a good conductor, especially dark-brown water, because there are metals in it, so water is a good conductor of the electric current, and when the magnetic field fluctuates, according to various rules of physics that everyone studies up to the tenth grade, in this circuit, and the circuit occurs because the isthmus is small, there are underground waters. So there is water around Tyup and the underground water under the isthmus. There is an electric circuit, and when the magnetic field fluctuates, it generates electric current, which, in turn, creates an anti-magnetic field, which recompenses the fluctuations in this field [unintelligible]. And it shows, both through calculation and experiment that in each loop there appears shielding of the inner [the interviewee actually uses the word *innards*]. And there are 15 such loops in a row. This is the first difference of this place [from other places], this is the place where the magnetic field is more stable, with less

fluctuations. [...] As I said, the field is stable here, and there are invariable living conditions: for the grass, the trees, and the people who live or move here. (FM 2019: Aleksander, 70)

Aleksander, who had for many years worked for the Academy and is familiar with the scientific methodology and argumentation, when proving the peculiarity of the place of power, uses in his story the Physics terminology and refers to his own experiments and calculations. It is not possible to verify, as part of this study, the validity of Aleksander's arguments, research and results, but his approach as a whole is important for our study, as it is an attempt to scientifically prove the peculiarity of the site, its space, natural conditions and the landscape. Aleksander moved to Okunevo in 2010 with his wife to continue his research on superconductivity, a field of Physics in which he specialises and which he considers a separate science that can disclose the "true nature of things" (FM 2019: Aleksander, 70). He views Okunevo as an ideal place for him to continue with his research and to harmonise his own life, specifically due to the natural conditions of the area. Aleksander believes that they conform to the ideas declared in *Understanding Russia* (1907), the last book written by the Russian scientist Dmitriy Ivanovich Mendeleev, which contains calculations to identify "the centre of the Russian surface, suitable for settlement". According to Aleksander, having adjusted the calculations, he identified Mendeleev's centre of Russia as being in Muromtsevsky district in the Omsk region, and in the village of Okunevo. Aleksander views his calculations and arguments sufficient to proclaim Okunevo not just as a place of power, but as "the centre of the circle of all other Russian places of power" (FM 2019: Aleksander, 70).

THE LAWN OF PERUN

Another 'conventional' place of power, though not as popular or important as Omkar and Tyup, is the Lawn of Perun (see Photo 3), which is outside the village. It is situated deep in the forest, to the south-west of the village; it takes about 20 minutes on foot by the forest road to get there. This place of power was created and named relatively recently, in 2016, when a neo-pagan group erected a massive wooden idol of Perun there with a space in front for the performance of rituals. Unlike other conventional places of power, the origins of the Lawn of Perun are well known. The initiative to create



Photo 3. The idol of the god Perun and sacrificial place at the power place the Lawn of Perun. Photograph by Julia Senina, 2019.

and name the place came from the Vedic Orthodox neo-pagan group. Every summer, on July 20, they celebrate the Festival of the God Perun, or Perun's day. Due to its name and direct association with the main God of the Slavic Pantheon, this place is considered to possess male power. Interestingly, this place attracts not only people who associate themselves with neo-paganism. Thus, visitors often attest to the special energy of the place and the "unexplainable" phenomena happening there. For example, many people see a connection between the mystical status of the lawn and its contrast with the surrounding dense forest, the fact that the lawn does not get overgrown and the variety of plants growing there are considered unusual. Some visitors note the abundance of the black butterflies in that place, and the wild strawberries that do not grow in the surrounding area. I was told on many occasions that during the skiing season in winter, the Lawn of Perun feels warm even in the most severe frosts.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the essence of places of power outside Okunevo and their mythology are in certain ways linked to the specifics of the landscape surrounding them. In the case of Omkar, its importance is defined not only by archaeological findings, but its location, on a hilly bank of the River Tara, plays an important role as well. For Tyup, the long bends of the River Tara and the unusual shape of the Peninsula become the features defining, in popular opinion, the unusual nature of the site. In the case of the Lawn of Perun, the peculiarity of the place is caused by its scenic isolation: the area, free of trees in the middle of thick forest, is considered to belong to a certain deity and to be full of special energies. In other words, the landscape around the village of Okunevo affects the interaction of people with the sacred loci and the ways the signs, symbols and narratives about them are created. Thus, the formation of Okunevo as a place of power was initially associated with the archaeological sites located around the village. In this sense, it can be attributed to cultural places of power, such as, for example, Glastonbury in England, where the location of the Abbey in the Middle Ages was of significant importance. However, a more detailed analysis of the formation of places of power evidently proves that an important role was played not only by the meanings and connotation that people attributed to locations, which is similar to filling an empty vessel, but also by the natural landscape itself, which largely determined the new set of meanings. And in this sense, the natural character of the area played a major role in Okunevo acquiring a sacred status. To summarise, the formation of this place of power in Siberia was a result of the activity of individuals (both academics and adherents of new religious movements) combined with a particular interpretation of archaeological sites and the natural landscape of the area.

NOTES

1 Thus, researchers who were engaged in excavations in Okunevsky AMR in 1970–1980, for example professor of Omsk State Pedagogical University Boris Konikov and employee of the Institute of archeology of the USSR Academy of Sciences Vladislav Mogilnikov, defined Okunevo V as a settlement that belonged to the kulay archaeological culture, that is, it was a settlement fortified by a system of ditches (Konikov et al. 2012: 89).

2 This refers to the followers of the Old Russian Inglistic churches of Orthodox Old Believers – Ynglings. Ynglism is a new religious movement, one of the trends in Slavic neo-paganism, created by the leader of the movement, Alexander Khinevich (b. 1961) in Omsk. The main sacred text of Ynglism is the *Slavic-Aryan Vedas*, which in 2014 were recognised by the court as an extremist text in Russia.

3 Translated from Sanskrit, the word *navaratri* means ‘nine nights’. During this festival, lasting ten days and nine nights, Hindus worship the nine female forms of God in Hinduism – Shakti/Devi. Summer Navaratri is the most favorite holiday for the Okunev ashram. In the Hindu tradition, Navaratri is celebrated twice a year: in the light half of the spring month of Chaitra (April–May) and the autumn month of Ashvina (September–October). In Okunevo, the summer Navaratri, which takes place in August, was also specially invented. Ashramites explain the appearance of this purely Okunev holiday by severe weather conditions, in autumn and spring it is still quite cold, the roads are blurred, and traditional few people come to Navaratri, and in August you can arrange a real mass celebration. To obtain the right to celebrate the holiday in the summer, there was a blessing from India from a guru Muniraji, Babaji’s successor.

4 Havan is a ritual in which the sacrifice of sacred fire is paramount. During the havan in the Omsk ashram, the fire is kindled in the *dhuni*, the reading of special mantras, worship of a photograph of Babaji, *chandan* (drawing sacred signs on the forehead) those present and Babaji himself – over the photograph, a sacrifice to the fire of *prasadam* (ritual treats such as nuts, dried fruits, etc.), as well as fresh flowers.

SOURCES

FM = The author’s fieldwork materials were collected in 2019. The materials are in the author’s possession.

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