



# Demonic Possession as a Pathetic Response to the Alien Invasion: The Case of Bashkirs

Yabancı Varlıkların İstilasına Acıklı Bir Tepki Olarak Şeytani Mülkiyet: Başkurtlar Örnekleme

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## Abstract

In this article we examine jinn possession (*yenlenep auyryu*) representations in Bashkir epic literature and contemporary cultural practices. We show how widely held Islamic and pre-Islamic religious and cultural beliefs of Bashkirs describe the ways of invisible jinns' penetration to human bodies and talk or act through them, sometimes making them experience medically relevant symptoms or without any sign of illness. Based on post-phenomenology method, we compare the applicability of the contagion and contamination models for explaining spirit possession and examine its interpretations by possessed victims and their social environment. We

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conceptualize possession as a consequence of infection with the alien that causes pathetic forms of involuntary response to a non-standard challenge. Once released into one's lifeworld, the alien contaminants spread throughout community and region, constantly mutating and taking new forms as they interact with the social environment. Finally, our findings suggest treating possession to be caused by alien invasion, as a presence of external beings violating traditional routines and destroying the lifeworlds of the victims.

**Keywords:** *Bashkirs, ethnopsychology, phenomenology, yenlenep ayuryu (demonic possession), spiritual healing*

## Öz

Bu makalede Başkurt epik edebiyatı ve günümüz kültürel uygulamalarında "yenlenep ayuryu"nın (cin yerleşmesi) temsillerini inceliyoruz. Başkurtların yaygın islami ve islam öncesi dinî ve kültürel inançlarında görünmez cinlerin insan bedenine nasıl nüfuz ettiğini açıklamaktayız. Cin yerleşmesinin insan bedeninde ve psikolojisinde çeşitli tıbbi semptomların yaşanmasına sebep olurken bazen de hiçbir hastalık belirtisi göstermediğini tespit ediyoruz. Kültürel kaynaklarda cinlerin yerleştiği bedenler vasıtasıyla konuşmasının veya hareket etmesinin nasıl açıklandığını ortaya koyuyoruz. Post-fenomenoloji yöntemine dayanarak içine yerleşmiş kurbanlar ve sosyal çevrelerinden; kötü ruh yerleşmesi ve bununla ilgili yorumlarını açıklamak üzere yayılma ve bulaşma modellerinin uygulanabilirliğini tartışıyoruz. İçine girip yerleşme olayını, standart dışı bir mücadeleye istemsiz tepkinin acıklı biçimlerine neden olan dış varlığın bulaşması sonucu olarak kavramsallaştırıyoruz. Kişinin dünya hayatına girmesiyle birlikte bulaşıcı dış varlıklar, toplumun ve bölgenin tamamına yayılır, bu sırada sosyal çevre ile etkileşime girerken sürekli olarak mutasyona uğrayıp yeni biçimler alır. Bulgularımız sonucunda, yerleşme vakasının geleneksel rutinleri ihlal eden ve kurbanların dünya hayatını yıkan bu dış varlıkların istilası ve o anda hazır bulunmasından kaynaklandığı şeklinde ele alınması gerektiği önerilmektedir.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** *Başkurtlar, etnopsikoloji, fenomenoloji, yenlenep ayuryu (şeytani mülkiyet), manevi iyileşme*

## Introduction

Bashkirs relate to a Kipchak Turkic ethnic group living predominantly in Russia's Bashkortostan Republic and along the Ural Mountains, where Eastern Europe meets North Asia. Being one of semi-nomadic peoples of Inner Asia, they practiced shamanism and animism during a pre-Islamic period, and they accepted Islam considerably early compared to the rest of Turkic peoples (Çöloğlu, 2020: 44).

As in majority of other cultures, Bashkirs throughout their history considered and treated various diseases through cultural ideas of supernatural forces and demonic possession. These ideas remain despite official medical practices are available and recognized. Both demonic possession and psychiatric diagnosis may contribute to social exclusion, avoidance or stigma,

making families of the possessed to seek not only medical treatment but also folk healers' help. They are in demand in the healing market, religious institutions, and hospitals.

The paper explains why those Bashkirs, not being consistent believers or adhering to customs, resort to Muslim clergymen or bagymsy (the verb "look" and the suffix "sy", indicating a profession), a kind of shamans, able to "see" and communicate with otherworldly beings, for performing rituals of exorcism or pacifying demons or evil spirits. Bagymsy in Eurasia were believed to mediate communication between human and spirit worlds, to be healers and fortunetellers (Hoppál, 2007: 21, 83; Arvas, 2014: 44; Bütüner, 2023: 421), holding sacrificial rituals (Arslan, 2017: 51), in Turkish – *cinci hocas* (Zarcone, 2013b: 178). These all are related to the ways of controlling events and situations, occurring outside human wills in Turkic mythologies (Bütüner, 2023: 421). Shamans are believed to be able to exorcize evil beings because they know how to get evil spirit's name, which strongly correlates with the nature of illness (Torma & Hisamitdinova, 2008: 89) and the way of returning demonic beings to where they come from.

Although demonic possession is hardly an object of faith for contemporary Bashkirs, it still lends credibility to turning to non-conventional medical practices of *imse* and *baksy* alternative medicine physicians (Hisamitdinova, 2020: 26). Thereby, this study contributes to clarifying several basic issues of possession dynamics and often-attendant violence and trauma. The pagan demonology of Tengrism or Islamic worldview of Bashkirs are not the only reasons to accept the possibility of *yenlenep auyryu* (*yenlenep* – literally "with jinn", from *yen* – Bashkir for jinn; *auyryu* – Bashkir for disease, illness), i.e. demonic (jinn or evil spirit) affliction that includes possession. Invisible and being able to take a variety of human and animal forms, Bashkir *yen* (Turkish *cin*, and, probably, Acholi's *cen*) refers mostly to an Islamized version of Arabic mythological jinn popular over Northern African, Turkish and Persian folklore (Çakin, 2019: 1144). While the term *yen-peri* (Bashkir for jinn-peri; two-member name of demonic beings in one word) reflects its consolidation with earlier mythological views of Bashkirs about non-material beings having the capacity of affecting humans.

The first section describes the ethnographic aspect of explaining the state of *yenlenep auyryu* and the ways of avoiding exposure to the problems of possession in Bashkir culture. It analyzes their representations in Bashkir epic folklore, folk medicine and ritual practices, and general religious and mythological ideas, providing cross-cultural comparisons. The second section highlights that Bashkirs, like other ethnicities, treat possession symptoms as a sign of supernatural invasion related to violence-induced trauma. The third section offers a phenomenological approach to *yenlenep auyryu*. Discussion compares the findings with recent ethnographic and anthropological research and articulates the limitations of the study. The final section concludes the research.

### **Theoretical framework**

Theoretical and methodological base of the research is concept of otherness central to contemporary cultural anthropology and overall humanities. Post-phenomenology makes

a move beyond traditional phenomenological method of regarding lifeworld as given in conscious activity (Rivera, 2021: 39), or our directed consciousness as intending its objects. In post-phenomenology, agent of action and cognition turns to affected and traumatized subject responding to claim of the alien. Post-phenomenologists regard extra-phenomena through the terms of affectedness and traumatized subject (R. Bernet), extra-passion (H. Maldiney), responsiveness and alienness (B. Waldenfels, B. Leistle).

Post-phenomenologists (Michel Henry, Jean-Luc Marion, Marc Richir, Henry Maldiney, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Rudolf Bernet, Bernhard Waldenfels, Bernhard Leistle, Line Ingerslev) substantively expand the scope of research methods and objects to consider, adding unconscious experience and passivity. Post-phenomenology includes into consideration challenges of subjectivation and extra-phenomena, i.e. phenomena exceeding reality of consciousness. J.-L. Marion suggests broadening phenomenology's research area to substantiate new phenomenology investigating religious issues. Description of subjective experience replaces reduction as the main phenomenological method. It considers affectedness of empirical subject by own history which turns accidental in empirical subjectivity to essential. (Sholokhova, 2014: 59).

Henri Maldiney examines extra-phenomenality in the experience of the impossible on examples of psychosis, depression, schizophrenia and melancholia. Maldiney's "extra" means "through" or "beyond". Extra passion exceeds ordinary passion, as it leads to the other side of existence. Maldiney thus draws a parallel between processes of emergence of subjectivity and its transformations during psychotic crisis. The only form of action left to the traumatized subject, is a pathetic attempt to respond to devastating event, to resist a nothingness that threatens to overwhelm. E. Falque classifies situations of illness, separation, death of a close person, catastrophe, or pandemic as extra-phenomenality. To overcome this type of condition, the traumatized subject has to reinvent themselves and create previously unimagined "another way of existing" (Falque, 2022: 316).

Maldiney's idea of pathetic respond to extra-phenomenality situation is developed in little known to date "responsive" post-phenomenology of B. Waldenfels, named also xenophenomenology and phenomenology of alien. The concept of the alien enriches our understanding of otherness. Response to the Other is what is present in every interaction with empirical others. Usually, responsiveness represents our readiness to encounter otherness and to actively and creatively respond to radically new event which are other and making us other. The post-phenomenological concepts of the alien and of pathetic responsiveness may offer a glimpse at how to understand spirit possession experience, and what symbolic forms are given to the alien and alienness in Bashkirs' cultural practices. Rational agent is aware of his or her doings and thereby responsible for them. L. Ingerslev applies responsive agency concept to explain situations when person acts unwittingly, unintentionally, without reflection (Ingerslev, 2017: 228).

Unreflected acts differ from conscious acts: description in terms of intentionality is applicable only to conscious rational acts. Even in most of unreflected acts, agent feels able to

act. And only little of unwitting unreflected acts are linked with “inhibited intentionality” and weak agency with impaired feeling of authorship of his or her acts and self-understanding (Ingerslev, 2020: 4). J. Hasse calls a subject with weak agency pathor (Hasse, 2015: 67). While actor shows initiative, pathor cannot behave proactively when responds to events. Alichniewicz shows that alienness, previously regarded as monstrousness or violation of normal order, (Alichniewicz, 2021: 405), is viewed in post-phenomenology as indicator or result of unforeseen life circumstances that trigger reactions of fear, confusion, and repulsion. We regard this new approach as productive for study of ethnic and cultural representations of personal experiences related to evil spirit possession. Its perspectives lie in potential to treat responsivity as a dimension of human’s openness to the world.

### **1. Cultural and cross-cultural contexts of jinn possession and expulsion**

In a possible case of possession, the only obvious thing for observer is that each case of possession makes people around feel the presence of something radically alien and supernatural, as opposed to the safe well-known and habitual lifeworld. L.N. Panchenko, distinguishing between the concepts of the other and the alien, explains that the “other”, in contrast to the “alien”, constitutes a necessary precondition for social experience and may become close and dear (Panchenko, 2019: 546). Even though those diagnosed with spirit possession by folk healers remark some kind of supernatural intervention, they are generally affected by shaman’s report on the invasion of something alien in their lives. Likewise, they are puzzled and unsure “what exactly invaded, and similar confusion is common” among various cultures, e.g. European (Mameniškienė et al., 2022: 108870) and Ugandian (Kitafuna, 2022: 831).

Frequently, possessed people fail both to explain and to resist their own destructive acts or even do not remember the events or are unaware of their strange nature. Demons parasitize and steal their lives and vitality, in some cultures – literally suck the blood out of people (Tranekær et al., 2019: 629) which becomes tangible and causes substantial harm to the possessed, as well as their relatives. To counter jinns, mullahs, imams and bagymtsy shamans do not only say prayers, but also push, beat, scold and spit upon demons. If the aforementioned main therapy options have been exhausted, non-conventional medicine suggests performing traditional kormandyk halyu – the ram sacrificial ritual, widespread among most Turkic peoples (Arslan, 2017: 60).

There are popular attempts to cure these possessions such as professional medical diagnostics and treatment of psychological trauma, visiting shamans and clergymen confronting malevolent spirits, and strengthening in faith and these are among proven albeit not always effective means. To this day, Turks, inter alia Orenburg, Saratov and Samara Bashkirs widely share the views that only bagymtsy or mullah who specialize in establishing a relationship between seen and unseen worlds to provide human well-being through rituals are capable to cope with jinn possession. Bagymtsylyk shamanic institute derives not purely from Tengrism that contained sanitation and hygienic standards of the pre-Islamic period and from the pertinent concept of protection from negative external factors. It also involves practices

of neutralizing infection, such as treating many symptoms as evidence of *enlenep auyryu* spirit possession. To exorcise spirits, shamans use blows with a twelve-cord leather whip which demons perceive as a fiery sword and these shamans shout swearing: “We did no harm to you... Go back to where you came from. You go your way! Stupid dummy! Hog!” (Aldar i Zukhra, 1987: 363–365). We highlight that shamanic Tengrist views together with Turkic mythology- became part of Turkish culture (Durbilmez, 2013: 99, 103). Although jinns are thought to come from Arabic tradition, other spirits (albasty, peri, dev) from Anatolian Turks’ and Bashkirs’ myths and epics (Ural-Batyr, 1984: 65, 74) have Turkish or Persian names (Zarcone, 2013a: 179).

Given commonalities and eligibility between Turkic epic and mythic heroes and presence of mythical layer in epic (Sayfulina et al., 2020: 23), we follow the tradition of regarding ancient epics as “transitory” genre bridging myths and heroic epics (Meletinsky, 2008: 1121; Ibraev, 2012: 12). Multiple authors describe it as “mythic epic”. For instance, mythic motive prevails in well-known “Ural Batyr” Bashkir epic. The idealized hero’s parents were childless for many years. His miraculous birth and ultrafast adulating are traditional mythic event for Turkic epics. Ural Batyr possesses special traits associated with mythic heroes, namely physical and mental superpowers. He was so strong that the thirty-ton stone he threw up into the sky in morning returned only at sunset (Ural Batyr, 1984: 102). From the very childhood, he was so intelligent that consulted his father, and independently reasoned on the questions of life and death. Ural Batyr gains authority and influence by freeing multiple lands and their people from invading evil monsters. Unlike ordinary people, he invokes fear of inferior beings and is recognized by higher beings as equally strong. When Ural batyr just born, devs flying in sky fell down to the ground; when they attempted to kidnap and to kill him, Ural thwarted their plans by looking on them. His gaze instilled strong fear in devs and made them collapse to the ground like mountains (Ural Batyr, 1984: 75). His marriage with the daughter of higher world’s king (Ural Batyr, 1984: 103), his body’s turning after death to Ural Mountains with its golds, gemstones and precious metals (Ural Batyr, 1984: 130) indicate that he dowered with supernatural abilities. This shows that this epic is continuance of ancient myths. Because of his special abilities and numerous feats, Ural Batyr seems to be one of mythic heroes moved into epic stories.

The function of shamanistic institute called bagymsylyk (from Bashkir bak – look or see, bagymsy/ baksy– a person who sees) is healing. Shaman called bagymsy or baksy endowed with a gift of seeing and exorcising demons by yelling out words kit (“go away”) and syk (“get out”) and lashes demons with a whip called camsy, traditional shamanic instrument. The term “camsy” includes “cam” component, clearly associated with designation of shaman (camsy). Modern folk Bashkir healers are continuation of cams (shamans), being believed to have mystical healing abilities with traditional method.

Along with these traditional methods, some other practices based on faith and magic are used. In treatment, shamans apply fire, pewter, water, and shooting from gun (Nadrshina, 1998: 22). The methods used by Bashkirs include reading prayers, reciting Quran, creating amulets, burning juniper purifying from the evil (Nergiz, 2023: 405), or bagymsy’s shamanic

music and songs (Hisamitdinova, 2020: 26).

As observed above, spirit possession is a phenomenon that evokes a sense of the alien and supernatural, disrupting habitual lifeworlds and often leaving individuals unable to explain or resist their actions. These cultural representations underscore the roles of shamans and mullahs in diagnosing and expelling these entities through rituals and spiritual interventions. This is why one should consider in detail the functions and symptoms associated with the presence of supernatural entities, such as jinns, demons, and other malevolent spirits, which are thought to invade and disrupt the lives of individuals, causing physical and psychological harm.

## **2. Possessing in Islam, shamanism and folklore**

In Islam, entities such as jinn (yen), fairies, and evil spirits are present. Albasty (in Turkish albasty) is the most famous malevolent being present in both Shamanic and Islamic beliefs in Central Asia, Caucasus and South Siberia. Researchers of Turkic and some of their neighboring peoples' views on albasty confirm that even those not believing in supernatural beings, suffer from them in sleep and begin their attempts to get rid of them (Özcan, 2013: 722). In Shamanism, it is seen as a female demon associated with water, while in Islam, it is among the evil spirits. Initially, albasty good goddess of birth, fertility and prospering, guardian of newborns and maternity. With change of faith, albasty lost her believers and degraded to the role of lower evil spirits and turned to the destructive version of Khomay goddess of newborns and maternity.

Generally, in Bashkir folklore albasty steals human's life energy, sends illnesses and nightmares, especially of pregnant and women in childbirth. Edina Dallos calls albasty a puerperal daemon (Dallos, 2019: 415). Among her easily identified functions and attributes, are long tangled yellow or orange hair, ability to morph into different animals, stealing women lung and throwing it into river, lake, or spring where she usually resides. in present-day spoken Bashkir language, the word albasty, like Russians' kikimora, is usually used applied as denotation woman having unkempt hair or a generally untidy appearance. Albasty has the push and disease functions (Dallos, 2019: 414). Albasty pushes and strangles people at night while they sleep, making them unable to breathe and being able to beat to death with her saggy breast, thrown back behind shoulders (Lossivevskii, 1868: 28; Rudenko, 2006: 271). Apart from physical attacks, albasty is credited with a habit of sucking human's blood (Nasyrov, 1880: 251) making her close to vampires.

A victim may subjugate albasty if manages to cut a strand of hair with brass knife prepared under the pillow, which guarantees fulfillment of wishes. According to Bashkir beliefs, one of Bashkir tribes derives from union between Bashkir man and albasty, who brings good fortune to her husband. But in cases when albasty penetrates to person striking by a serious illness, victim becomes possessed. This situation is traditionally regarded as requiring assistance of shaman or mullah. According to Bashkir beliefs, albasty is a wandering soul of a person who died a painful death, in an accident (e.g. floater), or buried without funeral rites.

Bashkirs considered jinns and peri as similar beings, calling them together yen-peri.

Among peri, Bashkirs distinguished bisura and shurali. Shurali is a male forest evil peri spirit enlivening Bashkir, Tatar, Chuvash and Mari tales (Hisametdinova & Şaripova, 2014: 37) tickling humans and able to short-term possessing for misleading and making the victim get lost in the forest. Bisura is a female evil peri spirit believed to be a mother of devs, described by Bashkir epic literature (Kongur-buga, 1984: 209). Bisura enlives dense forests in the clearings, sometimes possesses humans or inclines rambles or occasional hunters to cohabitation, patronize them, and help to get rich.

Translated from Persian as demon, evil force, monster, Turkic devs (also pronounced as diva, deu and diyu) are immortal creatures that can be killed by batyrs. Dev has the original Indo-European meaning – god of clear skies which turned to a negative character, after the fall to Earth. When people understood the power of nature, and ancient concepts of divas began to lose their force and turned to demons in shamanism mythology. In Bashkir epics and mythology, devs such as Ezreke are huge monsters, flying in sky (Ural Batyr, 1984: 61) or met in forests (Idel i Yayık, 2014: 110), feasting human flesh and blood (Ural Batyr, 1984: 40). We can find among devs' such functions and attributes as body covered with fur, residues of chaos in his image, living in caves of huge mountains or in the depths of the deep waters under the earth, having enormous power and acting not as humans, although able to appear in the form of man (Ural Batyr, 1984: 46).

In Turkic epics, devs frequently capture women, live in caves and eat people (Zhanar et al., 2015: 344; Ural Batyr, 1984: 56, 89). Unlike jinns, devs are seen by heroes and can be killed by them (Ural Batyr, 1984: XX). Sometimes, especially in later epics, devs received functions of helpers (Zayatulyak i Hyuhylyu, 1987: 184) resolving the difficulties on the way of the epic hero. The example are devs from Akbuzat epics, who were defenders of Shulgen and served people (Akbuzat, 1987: 142). for getting support from devs, they need to defeat monsters (Durbilmez & Gümüş, 2022). Similarly to Uygurs, possession by devs is seldom mentioned by Bashkirs and impairs self-control, psychic diseases, paralytic or speech disorders (Inayet, 2009: 41).

Jinns, according to Muslim mythology, are spirits, frequently having evil character. Jinns were known in Arabia in pre-Islamic period as unpersonified gods, whom Meccans considered as relative to Allah. some of jinns, after heard readings of the Qur'an, converted to Islam, while others are in the army of Iblis. Shaytan is one of jinn categories; according to some versions, jinns are descendants of shaytan or Iblis. Jinn's attributes and functions include dwelling at ruins of houses, wilderness, abandoned buildings, caves, unsolicited for visiting, and nighttime activity (Torma & Hisamitdinova, 2008: 91). As for Islamic studies, scholars note that, according to Qur'an and hadiths, jinns have physical bodies (Aydin, 2017: 1624, 1627). Unlike angels who are similarly unseen beings, jinns act against Allah (Maviş, 2023: 661).

Jinns in traditions and faiths of people professing Islam are regarded as remnants of pre-Islamic mythological views. Together with peri, jinn (in Bashkir – yen) spirits called yen-peri and in modern Bashkir society synonymized with dev-peri. It was thought that yen-peri or dev-peri might deprive person the mind, and to heal, one should make a sacrifice on



the fork of three roads. Further, shaytan, iblis, yen and yen-peri have Arabic origins, and together with bisura and albasty are variations of yen, as they are normally unseen, able to take animal form. They correlate with “anti-sanitary” dwelling places of evil spirits who tend to visit impure house and “unclean” person. As damage people (Ural Batyr, 1984: 40, 111; Durbilmez & Gümüş, 2022: 60) after sunset, Bashkir traditions discourage sweeping the floor and whistle at night (Aldar i Zukhra, 1987: 363).

As we have shown, in Bashkir culture, most of yen-peri are evil spirits or demons able to possess human. In some instances, impact of yen or albasty manifests in contorted mouth or sloping eye. these symptoms are called yen hugyu (yen – jinn, hugyu – beating or pushing), while jinn’s pursuing is called yen eyaleshtereu. As seen from above, Bashkirs, like several other peoples, associate possession and some other inexplicable diseases with vampirism. Similarly to European vampire and Slavic upyr, Islamic jinns, Turkic ubir (Hisametdinova & Şaripova, 2014: 36, 37), Turkish obur, yalmavuz and yek/içkek, hortlak and albasty are highly mobile creatures populating the universe and stealing human’s life energy (Hançerlioğlu, 2000: 29, 200). Bashkir obur (ubyr) belongs to vampiric class of beings because of blood-sucking and energy-stealing habits. Similarly to European vampire, Slavic upyr, and Islamic jinns, Turkic ubir (Hisametdinova & Şaripova, 2014: 36, 37) are blood sucking, highly mobile creatures populating the universe and stealing human’s life energy (Hançerlioğlu, 2000: 29, 200). Obur is a being who eats a lot but remains hungry and sucking human vitality. A person (more frequently magician) possessed by obur is called oburly keshe or oburly karsyk (Bashkir oburly means “with obur inside” or “having obur”; keshe is “human” or “person”; karsyk is old man or woman). Obur rules magician or suicide person to hurt living people and replaces their souls in their bodies after death. After the possessed person’s death obur lives in his or her grave, going out at night through the hole.

Apart from vampirism, there is relatively small area of beliefs indicating that all illnesses derive from evil spirits or jinns that should be returned to their natural habitat and avoided to be contacted or to stayed near with (Torma & Hisamitdinova, 2008: 92), as they take human’s energy, and their victims may disseminate negative demonic energy further to the environment. On the Far East, meditation is a way to cleanse oneself from this negative energy; Kashkays also believe that “bad energy” comes from evil spirits and strongly affects the lives of others around the person influenced by evil spirits, which makes people to avoid the ones with weak or decreased energy (Mustafayeva, 2022: 765-766). These examples demonstrate that Bashkir demonology is a traditional subject matter of folklorist research in Bashkir and Turkic studies. We meet some of demonic beings described in Bashkir epics, tales and written sources in many other cultures related to Islamic and Turkic worlds.

In a wider cultural context, the functions of Turkic and Islamic demonic beings are to fight against humanity and society (Aça, 2016: 1). Other authors investigate oral transmission of traditional shamanic beliefs of Turkic semi-nomads Kashkays about those spirits who left their duties to protect the good and to help humans, and turned into evil jinns and shaytans (Mustafayeva, 2022: 756). The examined functions of specific entities involved in possession, such as jinns, devs, albasty, and peri, within the context of Islamic and shamanic

beliefs – particularly among the Bashkir people – show that they are cross-cultural figures appearing in both shamanic and Islamic traditions. The studied beings, often associated with possession, illness, and vampirism, embody both protective and malevolent roles. An understanding of the integration of pre-Islamic Tengrist beliefs with Islamic practices and the coexistence of these traditions provides insights into spiritual and psychological frameworks of Turkic and Islamic communities. The next section discusses medical symptoms depicted in contemporary approaches to diagnosing and healing spiritual protection.

### **3. *Yenlenep auyryu* possession as a “supernatural intervention”**

To understand the experience of *yenlenep auyryu* possession, one should clarify some of its details and implications. In particular, even those who considered “supernatural intervention” to be somewhat predictable, when diagnosed by folk healers as possessed by evil spirit, are generally shocked by the sense of something very alien emerging in their lives (Scherz et al., 2022: 109). Islamic jinns may look like hallucinations or activity of subconscious (Aydin, 2017: 1627). Particularly, many cultures at the time disregarded essential differences and controversial points in mental and physical symptoms of entirely different diseases labeled as “vampirism” (Tranekær et al., 2019: 627) or *janun* (madness) and epilepsy (Çakin, 2019: 1144). These medical symptoms may include feeling during or after sleep seeing or hearing strange beings, a kind of a supernatural pressing (Nergiz, 2023: 406) or something (more precisely, somebody) heavy on the chest, feeling of drowning with the hands of somebody else, thirst, inability to move, voices and sounds, stiff muscles and heavy legs; these all relate to medical diagnoses of sleep paralysis (Mustafayeva, 2022: 764-765).

This might explain the effect of “outer impact” shared cross-culturally. The aforementioned descriptions may also designate that broad social trends and single events affect the possessed in an indirect, non-literal, opaque, sometimes strange and “supernatural” way. The possessed start behaving strangely for not fully elucidated reasons after having gone through tough experiences such as the death of someone close or violence. Even so, when there is no complete cure, the possessed doubt and wonder if traumatic events are the real reason why they engage in strange sorts of behavior. As there is no scientific proof, this remains a hypothesis. The opinions of the possessed and those close to them are rather characterized by questioning the existence of the supernatural and the uncertainty about how to approach them appropriately and what to do if they become a prime matter of concern among Bashkirs.

Further sections clarify why Bashkir families tend to test all known approaches – they take the possessed to several doctors, soothsayers, psychologists, and clergymen, and give soothing herbs. From an ordinary everyday idea, mental health professionals, clergymen and shamans differently call and approach the same condition depending on their professional occupation – possession, trauma and sin accordingly. We suggest that none of these approaches makes the measures taken any less effective, as apart from the applied method, the intervention success varies by working experience and expertise of the particular specialist who practices this or that technique.

#### **4. Scientific explanation and comparativist view of otherworldly affliction beliefs: a pathetic response to uncertainty**

Even in cases when those suffering from *yenlenep auyryu* are aware of doing weird things, they still have difficulties while unambiguously attempting to determine what exactly they experience and where these spirits do originate from. That is why close relatives or folk beliefs typically provide clearer verbal expressions and explications of the possession, victim's feelings, and uncensored behavior. In post-phenomenology of Bernhard Waldenfels, alien questions and requires a response, thus representing an intractable problem not having standard solutions (Waldenfels, 2011: 98). Non-standard behavior is a forced response to a desperate situation, as even psychiatrists can only relieve symptoms by prescribing regular intake of medication, as possession remains. Without this, the entire affected community experiences the alien exposure which is called possession or *yenlenep auyryu*, although possession does not always imply a "jinn introduction".

Multiple competing hypotheses and the attempts to implement heterogeneous approaches by the family of the possessed designate this type of uncertainty. Those resorting to various techniques to treat possession admit the possibility to see the failure of their approaches and actions, being ready to revise their judgments grounding on new experiences to which the possessed responds. Possessed persons demonstrate active response, which differs from passive responses of those suffering from *koto yuk* (the loss of grace) (Sirazetdinova, 2024: 97). Within the framework of the alien's persistent questioning, actions against the possession are based on the assumptions expressed by the subjunctive mood. In contrast to the statements like "this is a demonic activity" or the imperatives similar to "perform the ritual!", the probabilistic expressions such as "these are, perhaps, the *yen-peri*'s or devil's machinations" and "if it is trauma, then you can try the exorcism ritual" describe variability, doubt and hope.

The paper compared five big domains of sources and combined approaches of post-phenomenology of B. Waldenfels, B. Leistle and L. Ingerslev, contemporary epidemiology and infodemiology, jinn possession as a part of Islamic exorcism context and of Tengrian shamanism, and a psychotherapeutical approach. From the standpoint of Bashkir culture, taking part in the rites of spirit expulsion or discussing them are not exceptional and unordinary events, which is the sign of firm belief in them. The consent of conducting the exorcising ritual in the absence of credible assurance on the existence of spirits may arise from the predominance of ethnical factor over religion in Bashkir identities. This distinguishes them from British Muslim migrants who have a predominantly religious identity and are more likely to discontinue pharmaceutical treatment for religious reasons than non-Muslims around them (Musbahi et al., 2022: 95).

The results show that evil spirits identified by imams, mullahs and *bagym*soothsayers are one of possible manifestations of the alien. In contrast to straight ethnographic descriptions of demonic beings (Düzgün & Yeşildal, 2023: 17-18), this paper applied the phenomenology method to explain the widespread practices of detecting and expelling malignant beings described in Bashkir ethnic and religious practices, having cross-cultural

similarities with of beliefs Buddhist (Iyanaga, 2022: 522) and Central Asian communities, the Iran Turkmens (Oparin, 2020: 736; Saki & Ahmadi, 2022: 568), and the Korean Musok shamanist (Sarfati, 2022: 42). The cross-cultural applicability of responsivity phenomenology may confirm its scientific as well as both “diagnostic and a therapeutic value” (Griffero, 2021: 691).

Alien gives an impression of coming out of nowhere, because it shows up in unpredictable ways. Radicalistic forms of severe repression and violence go far beyond what is usually observed in everyday life and affect the possessed emotionally (Auxéméry & Lahutte, 2015: 864), having an alienating effect. It is crushing, suppressing, and having an extreme power, as the roots of traumatic event effects and emotional wounds are conventionally viewed as deep and unobvious. This is why some phenomenologists articulate them as “monstrous” (Alichniewicz, 2021: 403).

The possessed are able to infect the house and a wider social environment with their problems. Social space, in turn, contaminates people who enter it, and thus the entirety of the lifeworld, including Umwelt (object environment), Mitwelt (relationship space), and Eigenwelt (inner world) (Leontyev, 2019: 29). This is consistent with cultural anthropologists’ data on the connections “between people, houses and ghosts” (Heslop, 2022: 407), i.e., on the reflection of the same social issues at different levels, including intellectual, emotional, social, spiritual, and material. To understand possession, one must take a journey through numerous cultural worlds inhabited by various beings e.g. jinn, Eblis (devil leader), albasty (female demon living in water), yuxa (reptile turning to human and seducing people), shaitans (evil spirits) and other monsters. The research limitations, however, hinder the researchers to explain cultural practices of purposeful inviting benevolent spirits during rituals to achieve the possession state, as it does Michela Summa’s reassessment of norm-deviation as underlying both catastrophic and pathological abnormality and creative or organizational individuality (Summa, 2020: 79). Religious scholars, cultural anthropologists and ethnographers provide good descriptions of “positive” (not pathological) possession practiced in religious ceremonies worldwide such as dang ki in Singapore (Lee & Kirmayer, 2022: 282), “spirit incorporation” to humans according to the “logic of exchange” for achieving mutual benefit (Manichkin, 2021: 175), cultivating ability to trance (Ryzhakova, 2017: 237), and possession for therapeutic purposes (Matveichev, 2020: 36).

We examined the complex and multifaceted nature of spirit possession beliefs, particularly yenlenep auryru in Bashkir culture, within a broader cross-cultural and phenomenological framework. Spirit possession in scientific (medical and psychological), philosophical, mythical, and religious contexts is always bound with radical uncertainty and the responses to it. The postphenomenological approach and the concept of sociocultural contagion integrate these contexts of understanding possession, explaining the experiences of possessed individuals and the spread of their problems to their social environments.

## **Conclusion**

This integral study of demonic possession, within the context of Bashkir culture, offers a profound insight into the intersection of ethnology, folklore, and anthropology. The ethnographic description of how demonic possession is represented in Bashkir epic literature and traditions, including therapeutic and ritualistic methods used to combat possession, ranging from shamanic exorcisms to Islamic prayers and sacrifices, illustrates that possession-related practices are deeply rooted in the cultural fabric of the communities, reflecting a blend of ancient mythologies, religion, and contemporary beliefs. The interconnectedness of these beliefs across different cultures, noting similarities between Turkic, Islamic, and even European folklore regarding the nature of evil spirits and their effects on humans, sets the stage for future detailed examinations of cultural, religious, and folkloric dimensions, as well as the continuity of ancient mythic and epic narratives in shaping contemporary understandings of spiritual phenomena. This provides a rich ethnographic account of how various cultures conceptualize and address the phenomenon of demonic possession, highlighting the enduring influence of myth, religion, and tradition in shaping these understandings. A comparativist view demonstrates the universality of demonic possession as a phenomenon, while also highlighting the unique cultural specifics that shape its manifestation and treatment. Future studies can also benefit from understanding supernatural forces and heroic resistance to them as universal human responses to the unknown, along with the diverse ways in which human societies navigate the boundaries between self, other, and alien. Further comparative studies may gain in understanding of how syncretic religious systems evolve and adapt over time. Future research could benefit from an interdisciplinary approach, combining ethnographic fieldwork with psychological and medical perspectives to explore the somatic, psychological, and cultural dimensions of folk medicine practices, for deeper insights into the symbolic and narrative structures that underpin these beliefs.

While comparing notions of demonic possession widespread in modern contemporary society with ideas of “infection” with the problems of the possessed (although they are not often verbalized exactly as infection) among Bashkirs and other ethnicities, one may realize that it is deeply narrow for individuals and families to understand social and psychological infection mediated by culture. Comparable recurring symptoms may suggest that the “abnormal” and, moreover, contagious conditions do not originate from the “inner life” of the possessed, but from a cultural world, that contains a rich diversity of imaginary worlds.

Although religious, cultural and ethnographic studies give detailed descriptions of spirit possession, they do not give any satisfactory explanation of its spreading in transforming forms and non-evident ways. The intersubjective worlds of possession, evident only for dedicated people e.g. clergymen and shamans, are not personal, do not belong to special narrow group of characters or are not artificially created. Rather, they link with cultural motifs popular all over the world, and thus the research findings may be useful for broader cross-cultural explanations of the same-order social and psychological infection phenomena.

The phenomenon of yenlenep auyryu reveals a complex interplay between pre-Islamic shamanistic traditions and Islamic beliefs, highlighting how cultural and religious frameworks shape the understanding and treatment of demonic possession. Namely, possession is not merely a pathological condition, but a culturally embedded response to trauma, uncertainty, and the intrusion of the alien into the lifeworlds of individuals and communities. The paper contributes to bridging the gap between traditional ethnographic descriptions and modern phenomenological interpretations, offering a nuanced understanding of how possession is experienced and managed within Bashkir society. This approach aligns with contemporary postphenomenological theories, which emphasize the pathetic responses of individuals to extraordinary and traumatic events.

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