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### **G.P. Snesearev as a Collector and Researcher of Central Asian Religious Beliefs (on the Materials of the Collection of the State Museum of the History of Religion, St. Petersburg, Russia)**

**Abstract.** The article focuses on materials from the Collection of the State Museum of the History of Religion in St. Petersburg which were collected by G.P. Snesearev's expedition to South Kirgizia, the town of Osh, and several parts of the Fergana Valley in the Uzbek Republic in 1940. The trip was organized by the Central Anti-Religious Museum in Moscow. The expedition goal was the study of vestiges of religion in Central Asia as well as the criticism of faults in regional anti-religious measures. In addition to collecting material objects, Snesearev made some significant observations on the degree of strength of vestiges of religion and on overcoming them. The next expedition to South Kirgizia and Uzbekistan to continue the study of Islamic life was planned by the Central Anti-Religious Museum for 1941, but the Great Patriotic War prevented it. Thanks to the work of Gleb Snesearev at the Central Anti-Religious Museum, the collection of the State Museum of the History of Religion in St. Petersburg boasts a unique set of artefacts and documents (photographs and observation notes) that make it possible to reconstruct some aspects of religious life in Central Asia in the time of tumultuous transformation.

**Key words:** study of religion, collecting, Uzbek beliefs, vestiges of religion, anti-religious propaganda, Central Anti-Religious Museum

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### **Г.П. Снесарев как собиратель и исследователь религиозных верований Центральной Азии (по материалам коллекции Государственного музея истории религии, Санкт-Петербург, Россия)**

**Аннотация.** Предметом исследования в статье являются материалы из собрания Государственного музея истории религии в Санкт-Петербурге. Материалы были собраны в ходе экспедиций в Южную Киргизию (г. Ош) и приграничные районы Ферганской долины (Узбекская ССР) в 1940 г. отечественным этнографом и исследователем религии Г.П. Снесаревым. Экспедиция была организована Центральным антирелигиозным музеем в Москве. Целью экспедиции было изучение религиозных пережитков в Центральной Азии и критика ошибок в проводившейся на местах антирелигиозной работе. В ходе экспедиции исследователем были собраны вещевые коллекции, а также сделаны наблюдения на тему прочности религиозных пережитков среди местного населения и путей их преодоления. Следующая экспедиция в Южную Киргизию и Узбекистан была запланирована Г.П. Снесаревым на 1941 г., но начавшаяся Великая Отечественная война помешала её реализации. Тем не менее, благодаря работе Г.П. Снесарева в Центральном антирелигиозном музее в собрании Государственного музея истории религии имеется уникальная коллекция вещевых и документальных памятников, которая позволяет реконструировать некоторые аспекты религиозной жизни в Центральной Азии в период глубокой трансформации.

**Ключевые слова:** изучение религии, собрание, верования узбеков, религиозные пережитки, антирелигиозная пропаганда, Центральный антирелигиозный музей

Gleb Snesev was born in Leningrad in 1910, in the family of Pavel Snesev, a practicing psychiatrist and a professor at the Moscow Institute of Psychiatry and the Institute of Human Brain. Having graduated from the Department of Ethnography at Moscow State University, Gleb Snesev joined Samarkand's Central State Museum UzSSR as Head of Central Asian Religious Beliefs Department. A very young man at the time, little did he know that the rest of his professional career and life would be devoted to this area and its study. It was in Samarkand that Snesev undertook his first expedition. In 1932, a small group of four ethnographers and a band of performers from the Young Communist League got on an araba and travelled to an annual festival by the Mausoleum of Sheikh Mukhtar in the qishlaq of Ostona in the Khorezm Region. The name of the thirteenth-century Sheikh Mukhtar was sacred: according to legend, there were a perennial spring and a miraculous mulberry tree near his grave. Until mid-twentieth century, it was a site of pilgrimage for women suffering from infertility. However, in the 1930s, an araba trip to the Mausoleum of Sheikh Mukhtar in the company of Young Communists was a dangerous undertaking. Uzbekistan's political and religious guerilla movement sprung to life after the revolution of 1917 and remained active until the 1930s. It is, therefore, not surprising that the small expedition was attacked by the Basmachi, as the Soviet press named the movement that defined itself as the Mujahideen. Forty years later, Snesev described his first and difficult field research experience in his book *Under the Sky of Khorezm* [Snesev, 5, 16].

After five years in Samarkand, Snesev came back to Moscow in 1936 and joined the staff of the Central Anti-Religious Museum, where he continued working with Central Asian religious beliefs. A character reference letter written by the museum's director in 1943 and preserved in the archives of the State Museum of the History of Religion states that, in the years he spent working at the CAM, Snesev "proved himself to be a highly qualified researcher, who took active part in scholarship and exhibition development, a talented explorer and collector of monuments of the history of Islam in the USSR" [Scientific and Research Archive, 2, fol. 19]. During the Great Patriotic War, in July 1941, he took part in the anti-aircraft defense measures at the museum. In October 1941, when the frontline moved dangerously close to Moscow, Snesev and other museum staff joined up as volunteers. In December 1941, he left the active army forces due to poor health and came back to the museum, where he worked until 1945. In 1945–1952, Snesev left his research behind and transferred to the Moscow Region Directorate of the Ministry for State Security. He was later dismissed on grounds of redundancy and resumed research work at the Institute of Ethnography of the USSR Academy of Sciences, where he grew to become one of the leading ethnographers specializing in religious studies [Alymov, 3, 71]. He wrote a PhD dissertation *Remnants of Pre-Muslim Beliefs and Rituals Among the Khorezm Uzbeks* and published two monographs, *Under the Sky of Khorezm* and *The Legends of Khorezm as a Source for the History of Religions of Central Asia*.

Gleb Snesev holds a special place in Russia's mid-twentieth-century religious studies, as every single one of his publications has been based on field data. After his first expedition of 1932, he visited the region of his research interest many times in 1930–60s, both as part of ethnographic and multidisciplinary expeditions. Moreover, he was one of the few ethnographers of his time who took field work methodology very seriously [Alymov, 3, 69]. It is perfectly illustrated in his mid-1950s paper *Some Aspects of Ethnographic Field Research Methodology for the Study of Religion and Atheism*. Published in 2013 by S. Alymov, a Moscow-based researcher, paper claims: "Field research methodology in the study of contemporary religious vestiges and ways of overcoming them has not yet been developed... This is a task to be performed in the nearest future by a community of ethnographers, religious historians, philosophers... One of many areas of ethnographic practice, the study of beliefs and cults requires special effort and care, for the smallest awkwardness or faux pas can sever contact with an interviewee. The main rule, tried and true, amounts to total elimination of the so-called 'direct questions' such as 'Do you believe in god?' What people truly think on this subject can only be discovered indirectly through conversation about their work, everyday family life and so on. Direct questions are only acceptable when there is a long-time connection between the researcher and the informant and they have long trusted each other, which, given the existing field research methods, is rarely possible" [Snesev, 6, 89].

According to Snesarev, ‘the only effective’ method of studying vestiges of religion and their gradual disappearance from Soviet society, that is a method that yields comprehensive and meaningful data, was the stationary research method, where a researcher stays in one place for a long time, expands his range of contacts and wins trust by appropriate behavior. This approach makes it possible to move beyond recording external aspects of religious experience to studying deep processes of human consciousness, to understanding the psychology of a religious person and the reason why vestiges of religion are so persistent. To obtain ‘mass data’ and make generalized conclusions, Snesarev recommended combining stationary research with themed routes [Snesarev, 6, 89–90]. His personal field research experience in Central Asia demonstrated that various vestigial aspects, including religious ones, are rooted in family household life [Snesarev, 6, 90; Scientific and Historical Archive, 1, 3]. Therefore, it was the family, the most conservative societal unit, was to be the main object of religious and ethnographic studies. Thus, Snesarev advocated ‘bottom-up’ research of Muslim life instead of studying the image promoted by Islamic priests.

In the approach described above, it is not only the significance ascribed to research methodology that draws our attention, but also the conceptual framework characteristic of the time, namely the frequent use of the term ‘vestige’ in both research goals and results and the view of the state of religious beliefs in Central Asia in the middle of the 20th century. As Alymov, the contemporary researcher of Snesarev’s scholarly legacy, has pointed out, “the making of Snesarev as ethnographer in the 1930s coincided with the cruelest Soviet struggle against religion in general and Islam in particular... The Bolsheviks and their proponents viewed religion as ‘a persistent vestige’, but were optimistic about the prospects of eliminating it... We do not have access to personal archives that would shed light on Gleb Snesarev’s views as a young man. It is hard to say what determined the young man’s strong interest in religion. However, having considered his whole research career, we have reason to believe that he was one of the 1920s generation of Young Communists actively opposed to religious beliefs. Besides, the tradition of atheism was most likely to have prevailed in his psychiatrist father’s family” [Alymov, 3, 72].

Snesarev’s research career had always centered around the study of religious vestiges. It is perfectly illustrated by his *Field Trip Report from Spring 1940* preserved at the SMHR archives [Scientific and Historical Archive of the State Museum of the History of Religion, 1] and his 1957 paper *On Some of the Reasons for the Persistence of Vestigial Religious and Household Practices Among the Khorezm Uzbeks* [Snesarev, 4], where he wrote: “While Orthodox Islam is losing its influence, Central Asia is still home to ‘whole complexes of vestigial practices’ that are mainly rooted in family household life. Most of them (magical practice, belief in spirits, worshipping sacred graves, shamanic practices) are related to delivering and fostering children, and the main ‘preserver’ of such vestiges is woman. The main reason for this is the ‘isolation’ of female life as well as patriarchal and feudal attitude to women” [Alymov, 3, 76–77]. However, Snesarev did not only state the presence of vestigial religious beliefs and practices, but also attempted to determine its reasons. For Central Asia, he pointed out the vestiges of feudalism and patriarchy in the very lifestyle of Central Asian ethnic groups. It is worth noting that the concept of vestige was very popular in Soviet scholarship and was widely used to define a broad spectrum of social and cultural phenomena, including religious beliefs that the Socialist society inherited from the past, but that were supposed to disappear as Socialism progressed.

As we have mentioned above, the study of vestiges of religion in Central Asia as well as the criticism of faults in regional anti-religious measures became the goal of Snesarev’s expedition to South Kirgizia, the town of Osh, and several parts of the Fergana Valley in the Uzbek Republic in 1940. The trip was organized by the Central Anti-Religious Museum. As seen from the fragmentary data on the work of Moscow Central Anti-Religious Museum preserved at the Scientific and Research Archives of the State Museum of the History of Religion as well as from Central Anti-Religious Museum collection inventories, in late 1930s – early 1940s, despite all the difficulties due to the lack of permanent museum premises, the museum never stopped expanding its collection. Every possible means was used for this purpose, including collection and research expeditions to remote regions of the country. Regular expeditions inter alie were sent to Uzbekistan.



According to Snesev himself, the region visited by the 1940 expedition was mainly inhabited by the Uzbeks, and the city of Osh was home to a famous sacred site: the Sulayman Mountain, which was featured in many legends and attracted numerous pilgrims from Samarkand, Khiva, and Bukhara. Osh was also the residence of the Ishans, leaders of the Sufi brotherhood, descendants of eighteenth-century Uzbek Sufi poet and educator Hodjanazar Gaibnazar-ogly Huvaydo [Scientific and Historical Archive of the State Museum of the History of Religion, 1, fols. 1–2]. Snesev reported that, during the trip, he collected a number of ‘material artefacts’: a collection of 15th–19th-century theological and religious manuscripts, protective amulets against evil spirits and evil eye, family treasures of the Osh Ishans (embroideries featuring Sufi poetry, namazlyk prayer rugs and irshads, records of Irshans) [Scientific and Historical Archive, 1, fol. 45].

A set of ritual objects connected with the name of Irshad Ishan Siradaddin are of the greatest interest. Among them are a zarduval (SMHR inv. no. M-6386-VII) – “a wall embroidery, for weddings, white calico, black, yellow, raspberry red and burgundy silk thread. The edge is embroidered with Uzbek poetry in Arabic script. In the corners, there are embroidered raspberry red and burgundy circles” (the collection inventory has a record that this embroidery was made by Siradaddin’s sister); a cloth “men’s, worn at the waist (carsi) that used to belong to Siradiddin Ishan, with an embroidery of Fusuli’s poem in a frame” (SMHR inv. no. M-6390-VII); “a stamp for making protective amulets against evil spirits: a copper board with an engraving in Arabic and Uzbek–Mohammad’s agreement with the genie” received from the son of Irshad Ishan Siradaddin (SMHR inv. no. M-3969-VII); a certificate to Irshad Ishan Siradaddin on joining the Naqshbandi Order (SMHR inv. no. M-8019-VII).

In addition to collecting material objects, Snesev made some significant observations on the degree of strength of vestiges of religion and on overcoming them. For this purpose, the researcher gathered a wide circle of informants varying in social status, occupation, gender, age, and strength of religious beliefs. The list of persons who had provided him data through conversation includes both sheikhs, mullahs, former tradesmen, local tabibs (doctors) and paranja-wearing housewives, illiterate craftsmen, workers, peasants, and Soviet intelligentsia members. Snesev pointed out that “extremely interesting data was obtained through conversations with famous Osh Ishans. In this case, the conversations focused on Sufism, the structure of Sufi orders, the household life of Ishans and the practice of Sufi Zikr (rejoicing rites). Religious legends were written down as told by the local sheikhs. Conversations with women who wore paranjās, their husbands, and women who have already abandoned this custom provided a lot of data for the understanding of reasons behind the strength of this vestigial practice. Craftsmen’s families yielded interesting data on the vestiges of pre-Muslim cults such as totemic and magical beliefs, belief in jinns and paris, and the work of local shamans (bakshi). As the research covered a great variety of social strata, it was possible to find out that the same issues are interpreted differently based on the group of believers to which the informant belonged” [Scientific and Historical Archive, 1, fol. 3].

The latter fact is especially significant for Snesev. He points out that “there is a tradition of approaching every group of religious Muslims with the same measurement parameters... There are two reasons: One is that some students of Islam still view it as a religion that is frozen in its development and remains unchanged since the times of Mohammed himself. The other is that both authors and anti-religious propagandists lack information on contemporary vestiges of the Muslim faith and the environment where they are still preserved”. As a result, “the mass of religious Muslims is viewed as something uniform; however, there is a number of groups and movements”. To identify these differences between groups, Snesev recommended not only one-on-one, but also group interviews, so that it was possible to cross-check the data and encourage greater informant involvement. [Scientific and Historical Archive, 1, fol. 5].

Living in the midst of the religious community allowed Snesev to contradict yet another theoretical premise: that the lack of external signs of the religious cult among the Muslims of the region demonstrated that there were no vestiges of religion in their circle. He wrote: “Very often, where there are no mosques or official priests, even where there are no sacred sites such as a mazar, a sacred tree or stone, the population remains strongly

religious". He especially pointed out "the role played in the life of believers by vestiges of pre-Islamic beliefs" [Scientific and Historical Archive, 1, fol. 6]. He emphasized that the main environment for the preservation of such vestiges was the female population, the housewives still true to the custom of wearing paranjas. This made such vestiges (of shamanic beliefs, healing and sex magic, the cult of sacred trees etc.) difficult to notice from the outside. They hide behind the walls of the women's half of the house. According to Snesarev, this was proved by the magic doll rituals aimed at causing pregnancy. He was able to observe and record them. A bakshi (healer) tells the woman to make a small doll, "a kurchak", out of sticks, pieces of cloth, and thread. As bakshi recites his incantations, the client rocks the doll as if it were a baby. After this, she throws the doll into the cemetery and walks home without looking back. According to the bakshi, "the harm sticks to the doll". Other rituals also involved making magic dolls. The so-called "lyukhtan" dolls were very popular. They were small dolls painted blue and mothers whose children suffered from whooping cough were supposed to make one. They took the dolls to the mazar (grave) of "a sain7t" who "specialized" in curing the disease and hung them on a tree or placed them by the gravestone. Snesarev collected several "for causing pregnancy" for the museum collection. They were made of pieces of cloth wrapped around a stick, with a white headscarf. The face was made of multicolored silk thread and the neck was wrapped with threads [Scientific and Historical Archive, 1, fol.19].

One of the issues the researcher focused on in Kirgizia and Uzbekistan was identifying the reasons behind the preservation of the custom of wearing the ritual women's covers. Snesarev wrote in his report: "Osh is still 'a city of the paranja'. There are much fewer women wearing cover in Kokand, Namangan and Andijan... I talked to women who still wear a paranja and women who have taken it down. Almost all of the women wearing covers express passionate desire to abandon this difficult custom. Most of them are perfectly aware of the harm the paranja does them. However, they all mention their husbands who make them cover their faces. I have often seen that, when her husband was not present, a woman would lift the chachvan, a horsehair net covering the face, even in public, even with other men present. Observations show that the propaganda against the paranja is mainly required among the men" [Scientific and Historical Archive, 1, fols. 31–32].

At the same time, Snesarev was enthusiastic to point out that, despite the old tradition, a wonderful movement against wearing paranjas now involved a great number of women, some of them religious. His expedition to Osh coincided with the preparations for the International Women's Day celebration. At factories, in offices and among housewives, there were large demonstrations and meetings. Taking off the paranja was one of the central issues. At every meeting, paranjas were taken off. In February 1940, 629 women in the Osh District took off their paranjas. On March 8, women burned their paranjas in front of the State Theatre. On March 7–8, Snesarev attended several celebratory meetings and photographed the process of taking off the paranjas. At the meeting of Arbakesh cooperative, three women took off their paranjas and presented them to the Central Anti-Religious Museum requesting that they become part of the Museum's permanent exhibition [Scientific and Historical Archive o, 1, fol. 35].

The next expedition to South Kirgizia and Uzbekistan to continue the study of Islamic life was planned by the Central Anti-Religious Museum for 1941, but the Great Patriotic War prevented it.

Therefore, thanks to the work of Gleb Snesarev at the Central Anti-Religious Museum, the collection of the State Museum of the History of Religion in St. Petersburg boasts a unique set of artefacts and documents (photographs and observation notes) that make it possible to reconstruct some aspects of religious life in Central Asia in the time of tumultuous transformation.

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