

## Orthodox Heritage and Cultural Identity: The Festival of Pokrov Among the Kreshin Tatars

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### Abstract

Based on the classification of Turkish dialects, Tatars are categorized into two groups: Kazan Tatars and Crimean Tatars. These groups are further subdivided based on their linguistic and cultural characteristics. Additionally, Tatar communities are distributed across numerous countries, including Lithuania, Poland, Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Türkiye, etc. The Kazan Tatars, who reside predominantly in the Middle Volga and Ural regions, are divided into three dialects: Middle, Mishar and Siberian. Among these, the Kreshin Tatars belong to the Middle Dialect subgroup and are predominantly located in Tatarstan and surrounding regions. Phonetically and morphologically, the Kreshin Tatars closely aligns with standard Tatar language. However, their vocabulary and expressions diverge in some areas due to religious and cultural differences. Unlike the Muslim Kazan Tatars, the Kreshin Tatars are Orthodox Christians. This distinction, rooted in their conversion to Christianity in the 16th century during Russian expansion, remains one of their most defining characteristics. Since then, Kreshin culture has been deeply influenced by Orthodox Christian beliefs and Russian traditions, shaping their customs, festivals, and daily practices. One of the most significant cultural expressions of the Kreshin Tatars is the Pokrov Festival. The term Pokrov, which is rooted in Old Slavic, means “to cover” or “to shield,” symbolizing the Virgin Mary’s protective veil over believers. Celebrated with great enthusiasm, the Pokrov Festival encapsulates religious devotion, community solidarity, and cultural identity. This article will provide

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information about the Pokrov Festival, its significance, and how it is celebrated among the Kreshin Tatars and other nations.

**Keywords:** Kreshin Tatars, Orthodox Christians, Cultural Identity, Pokrov Festival

## Introduction

Today, the term ‘Tatar’ is used for both Kazan Tatars and Crimean Tatars. During the Tsarist Russia period, this term was almost universally applied to all Turkic peoples. However, the scope of the term ‘Tatar’ has narrowed today, and it is now used for the Tatars of the Middle Volga and Ural regions (Kazan Tatars, Mishar Tatars, Kreshins, etc.), Crimean Tatars, and Siberian Tatars (Tura, Tyumen, Ishim, Yalutor, Irtysh, Tobol, Tara, Bukhara, Chat, Arinsk, Baraba, Tomsk) (Alkaya, 2002: 100). The Kreshins, who are among the Tatars of the Middle Volga and Ural regions, stand out as a significant part of the general cultural and historical mosaic of the Tatars due to their religious, linguistic, and cultural differences. During the Soviet era, the Kreshins were recognized as a group with a stable identity. In the 1926 census, the Kreshin population, which exceeded 100,000, was recorded under the category of “misidentified nationalities”. N. Vorobyov’s studies have demonstrated that the “newly baptized” Tatars largely reverted to Islam and that the modern Kreshins are descendants of the “formerly baptized” Tatars (Vorobyov, 1929, pp. 5-12). The works of Kazan scholars provide a detailed description of the language, material, and spiritual culture of the Kreshins (Mukhametshin, 1977, p. 184; Mametyev, 1999, pp. 138-148; Bayazitova, 1986, p. 247). The name “Kreshin” is believed to derive from the Russian word “*kreshchyon*”, meaning “baptized”. Muslim Tatars refer to this Tatar group as “Kreşin Tatars”. They are Christians affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church. Several theories have been proposed regarding the origins of the Kreshin Tatars. The first theory suggests that the Kreshin Tatars were previously Muslim and were Christianized following the invasion of the Kazan Khanate. The second theory proposes that the Kreshins are descendants of Bulgars and Nogais who adopted Christianity between the 4th and 14th centuries and were never Muslim. The third theory asserts that part of the Kreshins consists of Tatars who converted from Islam to Christianity, specifically the Kipchak-Nogai segment of the Tatars. The remaining portion of the Kreshins is said to be composed of Finno-Ugric peoples (Udmurts, Mari, Mordvins) and Chuvash who were assimilated into Tatar culture or were strongly influenced by these groups (Alkaya and Kirillova, 2018, pp. 35-37). In society, the prevailing view was that the Kreshins were an

ethnographic subgroup of the Tatars. However, from the early 1990s, the Kreshin ethnocultural organization gained strength, which led to intense debates prior to the 2002 Russian census, as this stance did not align with regional authorities. Russian anthropologist Sergei Sokolovskiy examined the Kreshin issue during the 2002 census through an analysis of legislation, expert reports, and press materials (Sokolovskiy, 2002, p. 247). D. Iskhakov argued that the classification of the Kreshins as a separate ethnic entity was a policy by the federal government aimed at reducing the number of Tatars (Iskhakov, 2002, pp. 235-249). In the post-Soviet period, various conferences on the Kreshins were held, and the findings were published in articles. The Kreshins are identified as ‘citizens of the Russian Federation and Tatarstan’, emphasizing their civic identity. The religious factor serves as an indicator of the ethnic identity of the Kreshins. Both men and women actively participate in religious practices. Young people, in particular, attend church actively on Sundays and holidays, performing basic religious rituals (baptisms, weddings, ceremonies, etc.). According to participants, the majority identify their native language as Tatar and acknowledge that the “Kreshin” language is the same Tatar language, shaped by linguistic and domestic borrowings from neighboring ethnic groups (Titova, Kozlov, Guschina, 2015, p. 266).

The term ‘Kreshin’ has been used not only to refer to Christians speaking Tatar Turkish in the Volga-Ural region but also for baptized and Christianized Chuvash, as well as Finno-Ugric peoples such as Mari, Mordvins, and Udmurts living in the same area. Therefore, the term “Kreshin” encompasses elements of coercion and various methods. When referring to Kreshins, it generally implies individuals and groups who converted to Christianity later on and whose understanding of Christianity does not extend beyond baptism (Sharafullina, 2017, p. 72). The Kreshins predominantly reside in Tatarstan, with some living in neighboring autonomous republics such as Bashkortostan (in the Bakalinsky District), Chuvashia, Udmurtia (in the Grahovsky District), and Mari El (in the Mari-Tureksky District). They are also found in regions such as Kirov (in the Kilmezsky and Malmyzhsky Districts), Samara, Orenburg, and Chelyabinsk. The Kreshin Tatars are divided into two groups in historical sources: the Old Kreshins (*Starokresheniye* in Russian) and the New Kreshins (*Novokresheniye*). The Old Kreshins are descendants of those baptized in the 16th and 17th centuries, while the New Kreshins are those baptized during the 18th century and later. Many of the New Kreshins reverted to Islam throughout the 19th century and the early 20th century (Arik, 2006, pp. 68-69).

The Kreshin Tatars, the majority of whom reside in the Republic of Tatarstan, are divided into five groups based on the regions they inhabit and their dialectical features: the Kazan Ardi Kreshins, Tüben Kama Kreshins, Tav Yagı (Mountain Region) Kreshins, Chistay Kreshins, and Nogaybek Kreshins. Geographically, they are located in the republics of Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, and Udmurtia, as well as in the regions of Samara, Kirov, and Chelyabinsk. The Kazan Tatar Turkish, spoken by the Kazan Tatars, belongs to the Kipchak group, one of the three major branches of the Turkic language family. Today, Tatar Turkish is divided into three dialects: Central (Kazan), Western (Mishar), and Eastern (Siberian). The Kazan Ardi Kreshins, Tüben Kama Kreshins, and Nogaybek Kreshins are classified within the Central (Kazan) group in terms of dialectical features, while the Tav Yagı (Mountain Region) Kreshins and Chistay Kreshins are included in the Mishar (Western) group of dialects (Bayazitova, 1997, pp. 7-23; Istoriya, 2017, p. 744; Alkaya-Kirillova, 2018, p. 51). The Kreshin Tatars continue to live in Tatarstan and surrounding regions today. They strive to preserve their cultural identity and make various efforts to sustain their language and traditions. At the same time, they maintain religious and cultural ties with other Christian communities in Russia. The Pokrov Festival holds great significance for the Kreshin Tatars in preserving their traditions and introducing them to the world. While most Kreshins identify as Orthodox Christians, there are also Protestants, non-religious individuals, and atheists among them. However, even non-religious individuals often readily acknowledge the influence of Christianity on their culture. Although Orthodox Christianity has significantly shaped Kreshin culture, Kreshin folk traditions reflect a fascinating blend of Christianity and pre-Christian Turkic heritage (Barkar, 2023, p. 6). This festival has become a platform that highlights the uniqueness of Kreshin culture and allows them to publicly assert the need to preserve their ethnic identity.

### **1. The Religious and Cultural Significance of the Pokrov Festival**

The Pokrov Festival, celebrated on October 14, has its origins in Greek lands. It is associated with a miraculous event involving the appearance of the Virgin Mary during a time of war. According to tradition, the Holy Virgin knelt, wept, and prayed fervently. She then removed her veil and spread it over the people praying in the temple, protecting them from both visible and invisible enemies. The Virgin Mary shone with great brilliance, and her veil appeared brighter than even the rays of the sun. This miraculous event helped the Greeks defeat their enemies. Since that day, Christians have shown great reverence for this festival. There is

another perspective on the festival's origins. It is also linked to the Virgin Mary's appearance to Saint Andrew in 10th-century Constantinople. Saint Andrew described seeing Mary descend, kneel, and pray, asking her Son to intercede for all Christians on Earth. She then spread her veil over the congregation in the church as a form of protection (Kefeli, 2014, pp. 154-155). This event symbolizes the Virgin Mary's protection of believers and is considered a significant event in the Orthodox world. Another interpretation of the festival associates it with signs and beliefs symbolizing the transition period between autumn and winter. On this day, Kreshins prepare pastries, such as börek, and share them with their neighbors (Khusnutdinova et al., 2017, p. 86).

The Pokrov Festival plays a significant cultural role among the Kreshins, and its importance has grown in recent years. When examining global festival traditions, such events are crucial for ethnic minorities to express their identity, and the Pokrov Festival is one of the most prominent examples. The regular celebration of this festival reflects the Kreshins desire to preserve their traditions and their aspiration to be officially recognized as a separate ethnic group distinct from the Kazan Tatars (Barkar, 2023, p. 6). Pokrov is also linked to agricultural cycles and symbolizes the transition from autumn to winter. It reflects the agricultural roots of the community, as prayers for protection and abundance are offered for the upcoming winter months. In rural Kreshin communities, specific rituals are performed to ensure the safety of livestock and enhance the fertility of the fields. These practices illustrate the intertwined nature of religious and cultural traditions (Iskhakov & Mukhamadeeva, 2017, p. 85). An essential part of the Pokrov Festival is food. Kreshin families prepare traditional dishes such as *chak-chak* (a sweet pastry) and various meat dishes. These meals are shared during large family gatherings, strengthening social and familial bonds. This highlights the central role of traditional Tatar cuisine in their cultural identity (Almeeva, 2007, p. 85). The Pokrov Festival is celebrated in two parts according to tradition. The first part consists of a morning church service, while the second part involves a large public celebration. Pokrov also serves as a family reunion; relatives and friends from distant villages gather to participate in the festivities. Family members and relatives come together to enjoy the holiday meal. Traditional Kreshin Tatar dishes are prepared and shared during these meals. Specially prepared holiday tables feature meat dishes, pastries, and a variety of sweets, symbolizing the joy and abundance of the festival. These communal meals reflect the spirit of togetherness and the celebration of prosperity that Pokrov represents. Various Pokrov Festival activities are organized in villages and towns, including markets, fairs, and outdoor events. These activities bring people together to celebrate the festival. During the

Pokrov Festival, Tatar families invite one another and visit local markets. In villages, families prepare a special meal at home or in cemeteries, consisting of pancakes, eggs, wine, and beer. As part of the tradition, people gather at cemeteries to honor the deceased. They sprinkle the food and drinks they bring over the graves to bring happiness to the departed souls. Additionally, the Kreshins remember their deceased ancestors every Thursday at home by placing an extra plate on the table and adding cushions around it. They believe this act symbolically opens the door for the deceased to enter the home (Kefeli, 2014, pp. 154-155). The Pokrov Festival is also a day of social support and solidarity. During this holiday, help is extended to those in need, and communal bonds are strengthened. Food and clothing are donated to the poor. Neighbors visit each other, exchange holiday greetings, and give gifts. For the Kreshin Tatars, the Pokrov Festival holds significant religious and cultural importance. It is a special time when they come together to celebrate their faith and cultural heritage, emphasizing solidarity and mutual support.

The following images were captured by Mehtap Suiçer on October 13, 2023, during the ‘Pokrav Çıñı’ concert in Kazan, Tatarstan.



Figure 1. A poster promoting the ‘Pokrav Çıñı’ concert in Kazan, 2023





Figure 2. Babies Dressed in Traditional Attire

## 2. Clothing and Folk Elements

During Pokrov, Kreshin women typically wear traditional headscarves, symbolizing respect and representing the veil of the Virgin Mary. Folk music and dances, combining Tatar and Orthodox elements, are performed as part of the celebrations. These traditions highlight the blending of Christian and ethnic heritage within the Kreshin community, showcasing the cultural synthesis present in their society (Iskhakov & Mukhamadeeva, 2017, p. 92). The festival also features folk music and dance performances that merge Tatar and Orthodox influences. These cultural expressions reinforce the dual heritage of the community and illustrate the integration of Christian and ethnic Tatar elements in their celebrations (Bayazitova, 2017, p. 744).

The celebration of festivals like Pokrov emphasizes the unique status of the Kreshins by reflecting both their Orthodox Christian beliefs and the historical roots of the Volga Tatars (Kirillova-Alkaya, 2018, p. 30). Music and dance play a prominent role during the Pokrov Festival. Folk dances and songs hold significant importance in the festivities. The Kreshin Tatars perform their traditional folk dances, accompanied by special festival songs, enhancing the joyous atmosphere of the celebration and preserving the community's cultural heritage. Renowned artists from the Kreshin Tatar community also give concerts during this festival. Dressed in their regional costumes and adorned with traditional jewelry, the Kreshin Tatars

organize various events and entertainments, showcasing their vibrant traditions and cultural identity.



Figure 3. Kreshins Singing Special Festival Songs for the Pokrov Celebration



Figure 4. Support Provided to Young Men and Women to Facilitate Their Marriage

### 3. Pokrov Festival in Different Nations

The Pokrov Festival is celebrated not only among the Kreshins but also in various countries and nations that adhere to the Orthodox Christian faith. Russia is one of the countries where this festival is widely celebrated with great enthusiasm. In Russia, during the Pokrov Festival, the last harvest is fed to livestock, which are then kept in barns from that day onward. Families prepare a variety of dishes and gather around the same table to celebrate. It is also believed that Pokrov is an auspicious time for marriage, and young men and women who plan to marry are supported (Ivanovskiy, 2012, p. 46). In the Eastern Slavic folk calendar, Pokrov falls on October 1, which corresponds to October 14 in the Gregorian calendar. In folk tradition,



this day symbolizes the transition between autumn and winter. There are also proverbs and beliefs associated with Pokrov, reflecting its significance in cultural and seasonal traditions. Пришла Покровка — не дала молока коровка (Vasilevič, 1992: 554-612) “The Pokrov has arrived, and the cow no longer gives milk” (Vasilevič, 1992: 554-612). This Belarusian proverb highlights that when Pokrov arrives, the weather turns colder, and cows produce less milk. It reflects the seasonal shift and its impact on agricultural and livestock practices. Если на Покров будет полная осенняя грязь, зима встанет через четыре седмины (Çiçerov, 1957: 237). “This belief predicts that if the weather on Pokrov day is muddy and rainy, winter will begin 28 days (four weeks) later. It reflects a traditional understanding of weather patterns and seasonal changes tied to the Pokrov Festival. Спереди Покров, сзади Рождество “Ahead is Pokrov, behind is Christmas” (Dal’, 1880-1882). This saying highlights the time period between two significant Christian holidays, Pokrov and Christmas, emphasizing their sequential importance in the religious calendar. In Ukraine, the Pokrov Festival is celebrated by both the Orthodox Church and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. It is also observed in Orthodox churches in Belarus, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, and Georgia. Beyond these countries, the festival is celebrated by Orthodox Christian communities worldwide.

The Pokrov Festival is not only a significant religious and cultural celebration among the Kreshin Tatars but also among the Chuvash, another Christian Turkic community. The Chuvash are an Orthodox Christian Turkic people residing in the Chuvash Republic of Russia. Among the Chuvash, the Pokrov Festival is celebrated with church services, prayers, hymns, and various social events. For the Chuvash, the Intercession of the Holy Virgin Mary, or Pokrov, is one of the most beloved church holidays. It commemorates the miraculous event in which Mary, at the Blachernae Church in Constantinople, covered praying people with a large white veil, protecting them from their enemies. Since then, it has been regarded as a symbol of Mary’s protection for all who pray and seek her intercession. In Russia, Pokrov also signifies the completion of all work, marking the end of the agricultural season and the transition to winter preparations. Villagers strive to complete the harvest before the festival and begin preparing all the necessary materials for the long winter ahead. According to tradition, livestock are kept in pens and barns during the holiday. On this day, believers pray to Mary for protection and assistance, seeking health, love, and harmony between spouses, mutual understanding within the family, and obedience from children. The festival is also associated with marriage. According to tradition, from October 14 onwards, matchmakers are sent to brides, initiating

arrangements for upcoming weddings. In the past, if a man and a woman met on Pokrov, it was considered a sign that they would become bride and groom. It was also said that weddings began under the intercession of this day's blessing. For this reason, this festival is considered a protector of marriages.<sup>4</sup> The Kreshin Tatars and the Chuvash display similar religious practices when celebrating the Pokrov Festival. However, each community also retains unique traditions specific to their culture. Both groups adhere to Orthodox Christianity, and this festival holds a significant place in their religious and cultural lives. The Chuvash also attend Orthodox churches during the Pokrov Festival, where they offer prayers and hymns dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Traditional dances and songs are shared features of Pokrov celebrations for both the Kreshin Tatars and the Chuvash, reflecting their communal spirit and cultural heritage. Both communities prepare their traditional dishes for the Pokrov Festival, although the culinary cultures of the Kreshin Tatars and the Chuvash may differ. Each group also performs dances and songs unique to their cultural heritage. These activities reflect their distinct identities and traditions. The Kreshin Tatars and the Chuvash celebrate the Pokrov Festival according to their respective religious and cultural traditions. While they share common religious beliefs and some similar ways of celebrating, each community expresses its cultural heritage and identity differently through these festivities. The Chuvash tend to celebrate the festival with broader social and cultural activities, whereas the Kreshin Tatars lean toward more religious and family-centered observances.

## Conclusion

The Kreshin Tatars, as an ethnocultural subgroup of the Tatars, actively endeavor to preserve their distinctive identity through language, traditions and festivals. Among these, the Pokrov Festival emerges as a cornerstone of their cultural and religious heritage. Firmly rooted in Orthodox Christian traditions, the festival also incorporates elements of pre-Christian and Islamic influences, reflecting the multifaceted historical narrative of the Kreshin community. It fosters religious solidarity and social unity, serving as a time when families and relatives come together to engage in shared rituals, meals and cultural activities that reinforce a collective sense of belonging and pride.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://search.app/VyjkZZJqyaHMBuBc7> (6 Temmuz 2024)

Over the years, the Pokrov Festival has evolved from a strictly religious observance into a dynamic tradition that actively reinforces Kreshin identity. By engaging younger generations and integrating customs with modern practices, the festival has become a living tradition that ensures the continuity of Kreshin culture. Events such as folk dances, songs, fairs and concerts not only celebrate their rich heritage but also project it onto a global stage through the use of digital media and participation in international cultural initiatives.

On a broader scale, the Pokrov Festival functions as a bridge between the Kreshin Tatars and Orthodox Christian communities, fostering intercultural dialogue and collaboration. It serves as a platform for cultural diplomacy, highlighting the unique intersection of Turkic and Orthodox Christian traditions. By bridging historical and contemporary identities, the festival demonstrates the resilience and adaptability of the Kreshin Tatars, ensuring their cultural heritage remains vibrant and relevant in a rapidly changing world.

Furthermore, the Pokrov Festival transcends its religious origins, uniting both devout and secular members of the Kreshin community. It has evolved into a declaration of their cultural uniqueness and ethnic identity, reaffirming their role within a multicultural global society. Through the rethinking and revitalization of this tradition, the Kreshin Tatars continue their efforts to safeguard their heritage and pass it on to future generations. As such, the Pokrov Festival stands as a pivotal symbol of their enduring cultural identity, linking their past with their aspirations for the future.

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