
NOTES AND REVIEWS

UDMURT ANIMIST CEREMONIES IN BASHKORTOSTAN: FIELDWORK ETHNOGRAPHY

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to present an ethnography of religious ceremonies by the Bashkortostan Udmurt. Our task is solely to describe the main ritual activities as we observed them; we provide very little theoretical framework and cultural meaning with which to understand these rituals. Thus, what follows is a “thin description” (Geertz 1973) of ethnographic reality. We hope it can serve as a starting point for future analyses into different aspects of Udmurt animist ceremonies.

The scholars who have studied these ceremonies (Ranus Sadikov, Tatiana Minniyakhmetova) have a deeply rooted knowledge of their rituals, because they have ‘grown’ within the Bashkortostan Udmurt community, while, as representatives of the Russian school of ethnography, their works are focused on the past, on the attempt to reconstruct what the Udmurt culture was at the last stage before modernity (modernity being considered as introduced by the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution). Therefore, they follow the present rituals not *per se*, but as residues of a bygone past in which the religious system was full-fledged.

This is not our perspective. We are interested in ritual as an integral part of contemporary life, with its own logic and role in present-day communities. The peculiar feature of these rituals is that they have basically disappeared in other regions inhabited by the Udmurt. In the Udmurt Republic, or Udmurtia, which is the core territory of

Udmurts, there are some geographically limited examples of village ceremonies in the south, in the villages of Kuzebaevo and Varklet Bodya¹ (Lintrop 2003), if we do not take into account the individual manifestations of traditional religion or worldview. While the Udmurts living in Bashkortostan have been protected from invading Christianity by their Muslim surroundings (which was the reason why they migrated after the 16th century) (Minniyakhmetova 1995: 332; Sadikov 2008: 7), their religious practice has evolved with only the minimal exterior constraint, which was shared by the whole of the Soviet Union (Sadikov 2011a: 108). Comparison with the Udmurt practices of the Udmurt Republic, which is not the aim of this ethnography, shows that ceremonial life is quite different, and that the main rituals in Bashkortostan are not precisely the same as in the Udmurts’ core territory.

We did our fieldwork in Tatyshly Rayon (district), in the north of the Republic of Bashkortostan. In our ethnography, we shall concentrate on public collective ritual life, i.e. on ceremonies that are performed at the village level, or associating several villages. There are 19 Udmurt villages in Tatyshly Rayon and they are divided into two ceremonial groups, separated by the river Yuk. Each village group holds ceremonies together, and we shall call them here according to the village where the main ritual takes place. There are nine villages in the Vil’gurt (Novye Tatyshly) group² and ten in the Al’ga group.³

The collective rituals are seasonal and take place before the solstice. In June, there is a cycle with village rituals (*gurt vös'*) and rituals associating several villages (*mör vös'*). In the past, between the *gurt vös'* (one-village) and the *mör vös'* (ten-village) rituals, there were three-village rituals (*kuin' gurt vös'*), which have long since disappeared (Sadikov, Danilko 2005: 231). The cycle takes place in December and is analogous to the summer one, only the village level is not held any more. The intermediate stage, the winter equivalent of the three-village ritual is still alive in the Al'ga group and is called the *Bagysh vös'*⁴ (Sadikov 2008: 206). Both village groups hold a *mör vös'* in December.⁵ In spring the collective rituals of these two groups are held with a difference of one week: first the Vil'gurt *mör vös'*, then the Alga's. In winter, the Vil'gurt *mör vös'* is held one week before the *Bagysh vös'*, and two before the Al'ga *mör vös'*. This is explained as intended to give the opportunity for people to go visiting relatives and attend both ceremonies.

The aim of these sacrificial rituals is to call for divine blessing on the community's activities: to ask for rain in summer, for health and prosperity all the time. The prayers' address is *Oste, Inmare-Kylchhne*. It is difficult to decide whether they address one single god or two, in other words whether Inmar and Kylchin are seen as two separate entities or as two faces of the same one (Sadikov 2008: 7). Inmar is the Udmurt word for God, which is seen as a male figure, a *deus otiosus*, whose interference in human affairs is limited to general benevolence. Kylchin or Kyldysyn is a deity that is much closer to human concerns and is mainly connected with fertility. One or several ewes are sacrificed during the performance and its or their meat is used for cooking ritual porridge.

The sites where the ceremonies are performed are established sacral areas, which are all surrounded by fences. Ranus Sadikov (2008: 46) notes that it is not an old tradition;

it has recently taken root in Tatyshly Rayon.

In Vil'gurt, a space has been dedicated to sacral activities at one edge of the village. The local collective farm Demen has built a fence around it. The sacral area also encompasses a prayer house, built in 1993 by the collective farm, where activities connected with the ritual may take place in case of bad weather or of the wish for privacy – for instance money counting.

In Al'ga, the sacral space is also bordered by a fence, but it is more articulated than in Vil'gurt. There are actually two spaces delimited by fences: a public one, with the 'prayer house', and a more sacral one (where women are not welcomed), where there is an open shed offering participants protection from the wind, rain and snow. The prayer house is smaller than in Vil'gurt, but more compact, and contains a stove, which is quite convenient in the case of winter ceremonies. It was built by the local collective farm, Rassvet. Al'ga is a small village, quite remote. It was chosen as a ceremonial centre in 1978, as it was wise to have a ceremonial place that would not be right under the nose of the Communist Party officials, as was the case with the previous sacral area in Starokalmiyar (Sadikov 2008: 205).

The *Bagysh vös'*, which gathered eight villages of the Al'ga group in December 2013 (only Starokalmiyar and Petropavlovka were left out), is held at a site outside the villages along a road (about 150 metres from it), not far from Kyzyl'yar village. It is a sacral area with a huge fir tree in the middle; the area is encompassed by a fence and it contains a shed, although there is no house nearby.

An important feature of the sacral areas is that they face towards the south. The place where the priests pray is at the southernmost edge of the area; the prayer house is situated in the north, and the fireplaces in the middle – people turn to the south to pray and for animal sacrifice.

We have attended both village groups' spring *mör vös'* and the two Al'ga group's winter ceremonies. Therefore we have suffi-

cient materials to describe how these rituals are performed, taking into account the differences connected to place and season.

THE PARTICIPANTS

The people and the functions involved in the ceremonies are the following:

- The manager of the ceremony (*vös'kuz'o*), who may be a sacrificial priest as in the case of the Vil'gurt group or a 'lay' person as in the Al'ga group. He is the organiser of the rituals, and, depending on the person, has more or less control of the organisation of the whole ceremony.
 - The sacrificial priest (*vös'as'*) in the case of the village ceremony, several in the case of a ceremony for multiple villages. The priest is a wholesome member the village community, he must be married and be respected for his impeccable life. Traditionally, as we know from old photographs, priests had special robes, called *shorderem* (Sadikov, Danilko 2005: 230; Sadikov 2008: 45, 191). This costume has been maintained in only a few cases (we saw one old *shorderem* in Vil'gurt); the other priests, who had no special robe, used for rituals a kind of white work smock similar to what grocers might use. However, there was a notable change in the Al'ga group in winter (December 2013): they had ordered through the Rassvet cooperative a set of newly made *shorderem*, not home-woven, but very similar to those known from old photos.
 - The priest's assistants, two or three men from each village. They are necessary because the ritual is a complex one and there are simultaneous tasks to be dealt with. Among the assistants, there may be some women, whose sole task is to wash the sacrificial animal's entrails.
- The village community: usually only a few members of the village community attend the ceremonies. Usually nobody except the people involved attend the ceremony at its early stages. Towards the end of the ceremony, men and women from the village where it is held, along with visitors, may bring gifts, receive bowls of sacrificial porridge directly from the priests, eat them with their kin on the spot and participate in the last prayer.

PREVIOUS PREPARATION ACTIVITIES

The preparation activities that are performed in the days before the actual ritual are important from the point of view of the community: the material input for the ceremony is gathered from the communities. Each household gives crops, butter, and money beforehand. There are different traditions in each village about who is to gather those offerings: in some villages, as in Petropavlovka, women are the ones who go from one house to the other; in other villages, as in Bal'zyuga, it is the task of young boys.

The village sacrificial priest gathers all the offerings. Among them, there may be also different kinds of textile offering: kerchiefs, socks, T-shirts, etc. They may be given beforehand, but may also be brought by the community members to the sacral area at the end of the ritual.

The *vös'kuz'o* must also find the ewe or the ewes (for bigger villages) that shall be sacrificed. Either they buy a ewe from a villager, who will be paid after the ceremony; or they buy, with the money gathered beforehand, a ewe from the collective farm. In the first case, the person who provides the ewe must also give a loaf of home-baked bread, into which a coin is placed.

THE OPENING OF THE CEREMONY: THE *SIZ'IS'KON*

The *siz'is'kon*⁶ is the opening prayer to each ceremony, today as it was at the beginning of the 20th century (Sadikov 2011b: 29). It must be performed before the sacrifices, but the modalities of its performance change depending on local traditions.

In the Al'ga group, the *siz'is'kon* is held the evening before the ceremony. It must be made while there is still natural light, meaning that in winter it is held around 4 p.m. When the priest and the organisers, with one or two assistants, arrive, they make a fire and put a cauldron on it, where they pour salt with a short prayer; only after that do they add water. This is the way in all ritual actions when preparing porridge. When the water boils, they pour into it semolina and prepare, with salt and butter, semolina porridge. As they explain themselves, it is quicker to cook porridge with semolina than with other cereal.

When the semolina is ready, the priest puts a piece of bread into a bowl, sets it on a towel and either birch (in spring) or fir (in winter) branches; standing in front of the cauldron, he makes three circles above the cauldron with the bowl held in his hands. The *vös' kuz'o*, as soon as the priest is finished making circles with the bowl, throws a spoonful of porridge thrice into the fire.⁷ Then, the priest prays alone turning his face towards south and his back to the assistants, standing in front of the simple wooden bench on the southern edge of the sacral area, what we might call 'an altar bench'. There are branches (birch in spring, fir in winter) 'planted' on the other side of the altar bench. These branches

symbolically represent sacred trees, and are placed behind the bench even if the same kind of trees are growing within the sacred area. There are as many branches as priests officiating during the ceremony. While the priests pray, in the *siz'is'kon* as well as in all the other prayers, the assistants kneel behind them and bow, head down to the earth, when he says *Omin'*. Then, all the attending people (and the anthropologists as well) sit around the table in the house and eat the porridge. Everyone keep their heads covered. Before taking the first mouthful, men hold the spoon with porridge in front of their mouth and say a short prayer in a low voice. Usually some porridge remains for the next day.

What is important is that the fire is kept burning for the whole night, so that on the following morning it would be possible to light the other sacral fires from it. This requires some attention: thick logs are placed on the fire, and somebody living nearby has to check the fire once or twice during the night.

In Vil'gurt, the *siz'is'kon* is held early in the morning of the proper day of the ritual (see Photo 1). Thus, there is no need to maintain the fire over night. The other fires are kindled nearby. But, unlike in Al'ga, they make the



Photo 1. The first prayer, *siz'is'kon*, during Vil'gurt (Novye Tatyshly) mör vös', June 2013. Photo by Ranus Sadikov.

porridge with the same mixed crops as the final porridge, and not with semolina, and they also pray holding a bowl of porridge instead of a bowl with bread. There is also no 'altar bench', rather the priest prays in front of 'planted' branches on the southern edge of the sacral area. The rest of the ceremony is roughly the same.

THE SACRIFICIAL PRAYER

There are some activities that must be carried out continuously during ceremonial activities in the sacral area. As the fires must be kept burning, some of the assistants deal with chopping the wood and adding it to the fires all the time. Another overall task, which may be very demanding is fetching water. In Vil'gurt, horse-carts circulated between the village and the sacral area bringing water. In Al'ga and in the area for the *Bagysh vös'*, there is a spring in the forest nearby; in Al'ga, it is situated less than 100 meters down the steep hill; at the *Bagysh* area it is some 200 metres away from the sacral area. So men must bring it in huge quantities, because the cauldrons are big (100 litres) and all the participants need to wash their hands and all the cooking utensils.

Each village, represented by a priest and his assistants, has to prepare its own fire for the collective ceremony. Usually, there are as many fires as cauldrons, and as many ewes as priests praying at the ceremony. The priests are not chosen (by the *vös' kuz'o*) according to which village has provided the ewes, but according to other criteria: for example in June, the village of Bal'zyuga provided a ewe (but we do not know who paid for it), although its young

sacrificial priest was associated as assistant but did not publicly pray.

When the fire is big enough, a cauldron is put onto it (see Photo 2). The first act is to pour salt into the cauldron with a prayer, as it was done in the *siz'is'kon*, and only afterwards is water added. At the same time, the assistants prepare the ewes for the sacrifice. The ewes must be healthy and have had lambs at least once previously. They are brought forwards. They are 'cleaned': the assistants sprinkle their heads, bodies and legs with water using small bunches of twigs. The priests take a bowl, hold it on a towel with branches, put on it the bread that will be served with the ewes, and prepare to pray. Each priest stays over his cauldron and makes three circles with the bowl, as in the case of the *siz'is'kon*. While the priests pray, the assistants are working in pairs or threes on the sacrificial animals. In Alga, three men were dealing with the ewe during the prayer: while one assistant holds it down on the ground, the other slits its throat through the sacred twigs with a knife, and the third collects the animal's blood on a spoon and throws it into the fire. He must do it three times. In the Vil'gurt summer prayer there were only two men; then, the one who holds the knife also holds the spoon. When



Photo 2. The five *vös'as'* praying during *Al'ga mör vös'*, June 2013. Photo by Eva Toulouze.

possible, the ritual slaughtering takes place simultaneously for all the ewes.⁸ During the prayer, the attendants not involved in ewe slaughtering behave as before: they kneel and bow every time the priest says *Omin'*. At the end of the prayer, the priests each throw three small pieces of bread into the fire.

THE MEAT PRAYER

There is then quite a long pause in the ritual activities.

The priests may chat with one another or with other people, while some of the assistants are engaged in skinning and cutting the ewes into pieces. When there are women available, they wash the entrails. When no woman is there, the entrails are not cleaned and will later be thrown into the fire. The assistants mark certain pieces of meat that the priest will use for prayer. The hides of the sacrificial animals are placed in front of the 'altar bench' (Alga) or on sides of the 'altar line' (Vilgurt).

When they have finished, they bring the meat pieces in buckets to the cauldrons. When there are only white ewes to be sacrificed, their meat may be mixed. When there are also black sheep, the procedure is somewhat different: they must be isolated from the others and their meat is not to be mixed with any other. Actually black sheep are sacrificed to a different deity, the earth's deity, *Mu-mumy* (Earth Mother). Therefore a hole is made in the ground where the black ewe's blood flows as an offering to the earth⁹ (see Sadikov 2008: 37). Its flesh and skin are separated from the others and one cauldron is dedicated to this particular ewe.

The meat is put into the boiling water in the cauldrons. And the company is quite free to smoke cigarettes (outside the sacral area), to drink tea and interact until the meat is cooked. When it is well cooked, so that the meat separates easily from the bones, it is extracted from the cauldrons and put into big bowls. Then, the priests have to fish out the parts of the animal they will need for the prayer: the heart, a piece of the liver, a piece of a lower right side rib, a piece of the right foreleg, the whole head. The ribs and the legs are duly marked with a string by the assistants who skinned the animals, so that the priest recognises the proper ones for his selection.

When the prayer bowl is ready, the priests rotate the bowl clockwise three times above fire (in Vil'gurt, the priest did it four times, maybe because he had black ewe's meat in his hand); they go to their post behind the 'altar' and pray with the meat, the towel and the branches (see Photo 3). Behind their backs, there are the fires with the cauldrons, behind the fires the bowls with the meat and behind the meat some seated assistants. The others kneel, still behind, and behave as is proper during the prayer.



Photo 3. The four *vös'as'* praying during Vil'gurt (Novye Tatyshly) mör *vös'*, June 2013. Photo by Eva Toulouze.

When the prayer is finished, the assistants gather around the priests with the meat and eat the first of the prayer meat. Before eating, the men hold the piece of meat in front of their mouth and say a short prayer in a low voice. If there are guests, they are invited to join after the men have eaten. After this eating moment, two activities will be performed simultaneously. On the one hand some of the assistants deal with the meat and separate the meat from the bones. The bones are collected in buckets,



Photo 4. Preparation of the porridge during Vil'gurt (Novye Tatyshly) mör vös', June 2013. Photo by Eva Toulouze.

which are given to the first villagers to attend for them to nibble. On the other hand, there is action around the cauldrons: first, broth from all the cauldrons is mixed by the assistants, who pour it with buckets from one cauldron into the others. Then, crops are also properly mixed and poured into the cauldrons. The same is performed for butter (in Vilgurt, the butter is added at the end). We may interpret this mixing as a community strengthening aspect of the ritual. At this stage, the porridge must be continuously mixed and assistants are now constantly behind the cauldron stirring with long wooden poles (see Photo 4).

Then starts the final stage of the ceremony. People have been arriving throughout the previous stage. In winter, they gather in the house and wait until the porridge is ready, nibbling the bones and interacting. Some people have given beforehand, along with the crops, money and butter, textile offerings and bread. Those who afford to come personally bring them. In Vil'gurt, they just put the offerings in specific places: a horizontal pole for the textiles, a low bench in front of the praying priests for the bread. In Al'ga, the tradition is different: the items are given to a *vös'as'*, who blesses them with some words

and hangs them on a rope. If the people cannot afford to attend the ceremony, they give these items beforehand to the *vös' kuz'o*.

When the porridge is ready, the meat is poured into the cauldrons. The assistants (and sometimes the priests as well) stir until they decide the porridge is finally ready. Then, they take the cauldrons from the fire (in Al'ga, the cauldrons are covered with wooden lids in order to prevent cooling) and distribute the porridge to the audience and to the assistants (see Photo 5). Before eating, the men (at least the priests) say a short prayer in a low voice while holding the spoon with porridge in front of their mouth. In winter, the audience is more sparse: some village women or children (seldom men) attend the last stage and take porridge back home. In spring, it is a joyful moment when families and kin gather on the grass and eat their porridge together.

THE CLOSING OF THE CEREMONY

The closing of the ceremony consists of the final prayer and the sweeping of the fire-places.



Photo 5. Distribution of the porridge during *Al'ga mör vös'*, June 2013.
Photo by Eva Toulouze.

In Vilgurt, the last prayer is the prayer over the money offerings (*džuget*). Actually during the ceremony, a plate or a special box is put out, into which people are encouraged to offer money. The money gathered in the villages has also been counted and gathered at that stage. When most people have eaten, including the priests, it is time for the money prayer. In Vilgurt, this was done by the two most important priests – they were kneeling in front of the money box while saying the prayer. Interestingly, this was the only time during the whole ceremony when the priests took off their hats. The last prayer is followed by quite a big audience, which participates in the prayer – it is quite a big village too! – kneeling and bowing. The very end of the ceremony is quite informal – the two head priests sweep the fireplaces while the audience leaves the ceremonial ground and the other priests and assistants start washing cooking utensils and packing things.

In *Al'ga*, there is no communal prayer with money. Priests may pray with money at the request of visitors, who donate money and ask for an individual prayer to protect their family, etc. We witnessed only once the head priest praying with his hat on, while the

other priests and assistants were busy with distributing the porridge and cleaning the cooking utensils. The visitors were eating farther from the sacral area and were not active in the prayer activity. Money was washed before being offered, and an upturned water bottle is nailed nearby, allowing people to pour water on the money (in winter money is washed in snow).

In *Al'ga* the closing of the ceremony is somewhat different than in Vilgurt. While the priests pray holding the

branches in their hand, some of the assistants walk in circles around the fireplaces, on which the bones and the entrails have been piled up to burn, they hold branches in their hands and symbolically sweep the fireplaces. They walk clockwise in a circle thrice, and then join the remaining assistants, who kneel and behave as is proper during the prayer (see Photo 6).

The sweeping of the fireplaces marks the end of the ceremony. The last activities are to clean what is to be cleaned – the wooden poles, empty cauldrons, etc. Further on, people get ready to go back to the villages. In summer most attended by car. In winter, horse-carts were the more frequent means of transportation. The cauldrons or buckets full of porridge are packed back onto the carts and the ceremony is closed.

THE DISTRIBUTION

The inhabitants of the villages, who have contributed to the ceremony, generally do not attend its performance, and this does not seem to be a problem for them. What is important is that they get their part of the sacral por-

ridge: this is their way to participate. When the sacrificial priest comes 'home', he distributes back to the villagers the output of the ceremony: it is the reverse operation, symmetrical to the one before the ritual.

The villages are divided into areas and the porridge is distributed into each area. So, in all the families, people will eat the sacral porridge, showing their particular attitude towards this meal by covering their heads while eating. As Minniyakhmetova (1995: 333) says: "It is believed that magic virtues of the food enter everyone who eats them".

This is a general description of the collective rituals performed by the Bashkortostan Udmurts in the Tatyshly Rayon. We take into account the local differences and the repetitive pattern of these rituals. We consider that attending four such rituals performed by two different groups gives us enough justification to consider that if some action has been performed in the same way every time, we may consider it is canonical.

We have found it extremely interesting to notice the differences between the ritual in two village groups that are very close to one another and that belong to the same wider region. There are other regions in Bashkortostan where the Udmurt dwell and it shall certainly be useful to attend ceremonies in those regions too, in order to achieve a cartography of the rituals that are fully alive today in the countryside.



Photo 6. The last prayer and the closing of the fireplaces during *Al'ga mör vös'*, June 2013. Photo by Eva Toulouze.

NOTES

1 Technically Varklet Bodya is in Tatarstan, but it is situated some kilometres from Kuzebaev and is clearly part of the same cultural complex, and does not belong to the Udmurt diasporas in Muslim territory.

2 Aribash, Yuda, Vyazovka, Urazgyldy, Bal'zyuga, Mayskiy, as well as Verhnye, Nizhnye and Novye Tatyshly (Sadikov 2008: 205).

3 Bigineev, Tanypovka, Kyzyl'yar, Verhnye and Nizhnebaltachevo, Starokal'miyarovo, Al'ga, Dubovka, Petropavlovka, Utar-El'ga (Sadikov 2008: 205–206).

4 While according to Sadikov this ceremony concerned only the three villages of Nizhnebaltachevo, Verhnebaltachevo and Kyzyl'yar, our experience is different: it was attended in 2003 by eight villages.

5 Actually this is a new tradition at least for the Vil'gurt group: it had been interrupted in the Soviet period (Sadikov 2008: 212).

6 From *siz'is'kyny* 'to promise, to devote, to consecrate'.

7 We noticed this action in the winter ceremony, while we had not fixed it in the summer rituals. This does not mean it did not take place: there are several actions taking place at the same time and it is easy, while concentrating on the priest, to miss some other activities.

8 In the *Bagysh vös'*, they discovered that knives had been forgotten, and they had but one knife, so the ewes were slaughtered one after the other.

9 Actually, this tradition exists in Udmurtia too (Lintrop 1995: 274).

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