

CHUVASH VILLAGE SACRED SPACES IN THE  
SAMARA TRANS-VOLGA REGION

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ABSTRACT

The article\* examines the sacred landscape in the space of Chuvash villages in the Samara Trans-Volga region. A sacred space is understood as a territory that, from the point of view of local people, has special properties and performs certain functions in their spiritual practices. Among the Samara Chuvash, represented in the majority by Orthodox communities, in the minority by pagans and Muslims, there are sites of various confessional origins as well as varying degrees of functionality and relevance in modern ritual practice from a actively used to completely forgotten. The article describes various types of sacred objects<sup>1</sup> found in Chuvash villages in the Samara Trans-Volga region in the context of relevant religious practices, showing the attitude of the villagers to sacred sites and their significance in the formation of the religiosity of the Chuvash population in the region. The purpose of the research is to identify the principles of the sacralisation of space, its semantic characteristics, and the specificity and purpose of sacred sites. The object of study is cult sites associated with the natural-geographical environment and formed in close relationship with it (for example places of prayers and pilgrimage), as well as those arising in the course of human activities to create man-made sacred-spatial environments. The study showed that sacred sites make up an integral part of the religious space in Chuvash villages in the Samara Trans-Volga region, and set its spatial coordinates. These objects reflect both general ethnic traditions and local-historical plots associated with a specific area and its people. The formation of the sacred landscape took place with the development of new land, in the course of which a traditional model of the microcosm of the Chuvash peasant was created. The research is based on the archival, published and field material of the authors.

KEYWORDS: Chuvash • Samara Trans-Volga region • sacred space • prohibitions • religious practices

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## INTRODUCTION

The religious practices of ethnic communities are always associated with the places they are practiced, which are thus given sacred status. A sacred space is usually understood as a territory that, from the point of view of local people, has special features and certain functions in their religious practices. The formation of a sacred landscape is a process accompanying human world development, during which, as noted by famous religion scholar Mircea Eliade (1994: 25), “an irruption of the sacred results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different”. Therefore, the study of the sacred landscape is of particular interest in relation to colonised territories, including the Samara Trans-Volga region, actively inhabited by agricultural peoples, including the Chuvash, in the 17th–19th centuries. Founding villages and developing surroundings, the Chuvash marked them in accordance with natural features, purpose and local stories associated with them leading to places of prayers, sacrifices, cemeteries and other spaces that required villagers’ attention and respect.

The article focuses on the sacred landscape of the Chuvash<sup>2</sup> villages of the Samara Trans-Volga region, which historically were part of Samara province, and now of the Samara region and neighbouring districts of the Republic of Tatarstan (hereinafter RT), and Ul’yanovsk and Orenburg regions. The region was also chosen due to the ethno-confessional diversity of the Chuvash population, which is mainly Orthodox but also includes pagans and Muslim converts, making it possible to study the sacred space of villages in the context of different confessions and to consider the dynamics of religious processes.

The Samara Chuvash have sites of various confessional origins and varying degrees of functionality and relevance in modern ritual practices, from those in active use to those that are completely forgotten. The article presents various types of sacred site in Chuvash rural settlements in the Samara Trans-Volga region in the context of relevant religious practices, showing the attitude of local people to sacred sites and their significance in the formation of Chuvash religiosity.

The purpose of the research is to identify the principles of the sacralisation of space, its semantic characteristics, and the specificity and purpose of sacred sites. The tasks are to study the process of sites formation and their subsequent evolution, and to observe changes that occur as a result of socio-political and cultural transformations in society. Special attention is paid to the functioning of sacred sites in confessionally and ethnically mixed villages.

The object of research is the cult sites associated with natural and geographical environment and developed in close relationship with it. Significant sacred sites in Chuvash villages were sites of common village prayers (the field prayer *Uchuk*, the prayer to Kiremet, the grove deity, to Yrsam, the spirits of the area, the ritual of rain making *Şāmār chūk*), of family and clan rituals such as *Chúkkleme* (lit. ‘sacrificing’), *Karta pātti* (a prayer in a cattle barn), *Kil’-yysh pātti* (a prayer for home and family prosperity), *Şyn puş pātti* (a prayer for family members’ prosperity) and others, as well as cemeteries. The spirits of the area, which, according to the Chuvash beliefs, lived near villages, enjoyed special respect. There were also places of pilgrimage for people from certain regions. Thus, a public area of sacrifice for the Trans-Kama Chuvash was the prayer place of Valem khuşa (Khuşa tu – Hodja’s mountain, the name presumably originated from

santon Valem Khodzha) near contemporary Bilyarsk village in Alekseyevskiy district, RT, which today is also held sacred by the Orthodox Chuvash as well as neighbouring peoples.<sup>3</sup> With the Chuvash adoption of Orthodoxy, churches and chapels were included in the list of sacred sites. The article focuses on sacred sites located within the rural area, i.e. the territory of a rural settlement and the surrounding area (meadows, fields, forests) and does not study homes in the context of ritual practices.

Theoretical and methodological approaches are determined by the interpretation of the 'sacred space' as a complex of ideas about world structure based on its fundamental and interrelated categories with their characteristic parameters and sacred oppositions that determine the world picture and a person's place in the model (Popova 2011: 14). The concept of the sacred space is considered in works by Yeleazar Meletinskiy (1976), Vladimir Toporov (1983), Mircea Eliade (1987; 1994), Al'bert Bayburin (1993), Yelena Levkiyevskaya (2006), Ol'ga Lavrenova (2010), and other researchers. Specific examples of the study of the sacred landscape are presented in works by Natal'ya Zhukovskaya (1986), Nadezhda Shutova (2001; 2004), Anna Ivanova, Vladimir Kalutskov and Lyudmila Fadeyeva (2009), Tat'yana Minniyakhmetova (2009), Yelena Popova (2011), etc.

When studying sacred loci, it is necessary to pay attention to a number of relevant characteristics. Thus, the study of space in relation to time makes it possible to trace sites historically, while analysis of religious cults and folklore plots reveals the functional characteristics of the area under study. As Toporov (1983: 233) noted,

space (or, more precisely, the space-time continuum) is not only inextricably linked with time, being inter-influential and mutually determined, but also with material content (the original creator, gods, people, animals, plants, elements of sacred topography, sacralised and mythologised cultural objects, etc.), that is, with everything that somehow 'organises' space, structures it, unites, roots it in a single centre.

Therefore, when studying a sacred space, it is necessary to pay attention to its subject-matter characteristics. Things do not only constitute space, by setting boundaries that separate space from non-space, but also organise it structurally, giving it considerable prominence and meaning (semantic interiorisation of space). (Ibid.: 238) The geographic approach (so-called sacred geography) helps to fix the revered points of space on the map, to determine the radius of their influence on the religious life of rural communities.

The process of developing a sacred landscape should be viewed through the prism of human activity to create a man-made sacred-spatial environment for communication with the supreme world, or hierotopy (Lidov 2006: 9–31). According to the author of this concept Aleksey Lidov (ibid.: 11), "in the process of realising him/herself as a spiritual being, at first spontaneously, and then meaningfully, a person forms a specific environment for his/her communication with the supreme world." Thus, a person creates, in the words of Eric Hobsbawm (2000: 47–62) 'invents', a tradition, although in doing so he refers not only to the cultural heritage, i.e. traditions as such, but also 'invents' innovations. A sacred space is formed in a social context. As Émile Durkheim (2018: 405) noted, "the sacred character that things are endowed with does not follow from their inherent properties: it is added to them". Following this idea, another French researcher, Roger Caillois (2003: 152), noted that "some mystical grace" endows them with this quality. The world of the sacred, in the view of Eliade (1994: 25), is opposed

to the profane world. Durkheim, followed by Caillois, drew attention to the fact that what is sacred is ambivalent, that is, presented both in a positive image, in the form of sacredness, and negatively, in the form of filth (Caillois 2003: 184–185). These theoretical approaches are relevant in the study of the sacred landscape. Finally, a complete characterisation of a sacred site is impossible without its connection with ethnic traditions and local historical plots, without considering religious practices of a particular rural community living in a particular locality. The people's ideas about space are closely bound with religious beliefs and are embodied in certain rituals. These ideas manifest an important division between 'one's own', i.e. the space belonging to and explored by people, and 'alien', "inhuman, bestial, belonging to the gods, the area of death" (Bayburin 1983: 183). In ritual, according to Bayburin (*ibid.*: 187), a direct contact between these parts of space is established, while "ideas about alien take on increasing importance, which results in an increase in the semiotics of space".

Sacred loci are studied in Chuvash ethnography in the context of religious and ritual culture in the works by many authors, starting from the 18th century: Ivan Lepekhin (1771), Petr Pallas (1773), Vasiliy Magnitskiy (1881), Vasiliy Sbovey (2004). In contemporary historiography this topic is better studied in the monographs of Anton Salmin, who describes places of home and public prayers, as well as other sacred spaces (2007; 2016). Certain issues are touched upon in works by Yelena Fedotova (2003) and Anna Antipina (2017; 2019). At the same time, the issue of sacred loci functioning in modern religious practices and in the everyday life of the Chuvash in general has not been considered by researchers, proving the relevance of this study.

The research is based on archive materials from the Scientific Archive of the Chuvash State Institute of the Humanities (hereinafter referred to as SA CSIH); the Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts (RSAAA); the Central State Archive of Samara Region (CSASR); the Chuvash State Archives (CSA); on published sources; but mainly on the authors' field materials (FM) collected in 1995–2003, 2005, 2008–2009, 2014–2015, 2020–2021 in the villages of the Samara region and neighbouring districts of the RT.

## THE FORMATION OF SACRED SPACE IN CHUVASH VILLAGES

Sacred space was formed as the Chuvash settled in the Samara region and founded villages and rural communities, 'transporting' local spirits in carts from the places of their former residence, 'settling' them in a new place and continuing to sacrifice to them. Thus, according to legend, the Chuvash from Boriskino-Igar village in Klyavinskiy district brought their Kiremet from Penza province (RSAAA 2454). Before leaving, one of the villagers drove up to kiremetishche (i.e. the place where Kiremet lives; also called *kiremet*) and said: "Sit down, Kiremet", and gave him new land in a new territory (SA CSIH 183: 6).

The Chuvash continued to sacrifice to the deities and spirits of the places of their original residence. For example, the people of Tuarma village in Bugul'minskiy district, who had moved from Karsunskiy district in Simbirsk province, turned in their prayers to the Karsun Kiremet (SA CSIH 173: 243). Villagers in Yerilkino village, Buguruslanskiy district of the same province sacrificed to Surām<sup>4</sup> and Hērlē şyr<sup>5</sup>, deities of the areas in the Kazan province from where the first villagers had arrived (SA CSIH 207).

Other sacred sites recorded religious experience of developing the local landscape – rivers, lakes, ravines, meadows, forests, fields, the experience of its interpretation in the context of both general ethnic religious beliefs and cult practices, and local (ethnoterritorial) traditions. As Eliade (1994: 28) noted, “the territory becomes ‘one’s own’ only after its ‘creation’ anew, i.e. its consecration”, and “placement on any territory is similar to the creation of the world”. Sacred loci within a village and its nearest surroundings defined for local people ‘their own’ world, microcosm, served as spatial and temporal landmarks in ritual and everyday life. Thus, around a Chuvash village several sacred places, ‘sacred groves’, as people usually called them, appeared, which remained objects of devotion for villagers until the end of the 1920s, and in a number of villages of unbaptised Chuvash they still function today.

When developing the neighbouring area, villagers marked especially dangerous places associated with various tragic stories (death, accidents). Thus, the Chuvash of Buguruslanskiy district revered a spirit living in the hills *tēme šinchi kēlē* (‘praying on the hills’), which greatly frightened people who passed by. Residents of Yerilkino village in the same district sacrificed to a spirit living in a *tarān var* (‘deep ravine’), near a tall spruce. According to legend, a villager nearly died in this ravine after his horse got stuck there. In total, villagers revered 12 spirits that could visit diseases upon people; some of the spirits lived in the houses of local sorcerers and sorceresses (SA CSIH 207: 67–68).

Villagers could ‘set’ places of sacrifice in the course of warding off disease. According to legend, a birch grove in the village of Tuarma was fenced off and turned into kiremetishche by a wealthy Chuvash on the advice of healers in the course of a long disease. People in neighbouring Saleykino and Staroye Afon’kino villages in today’s Shentalinskiy district, Samara region, set up their kiremetitsches following the example of Tuarma villagers (SA CSIH 173: 243).

A place associated with the life of a famous villager could also become *kiremet*. In 1888 Nikifor Okhotnikov, a native of Chuvashskaya Cheboksarka village in Chistopol’skiy district, reported in his memoirs about the veneration of a birch tree planted by local legendary person Utlas, whose spirit entered this tree after his death. The spirit meted out punished for disrespect, and the only way to avoid this was to sacrifice a 2–3 kopeck coin by burying it under the tree. Another kiremetishche appeared in the former place of prayers after the local Chuvash started praying in a new place because of the constant ridicule of their Russian neighbours. An old man looked after the old place; on the day of public prayers, he used to bury a coin there. (Okhotnikov 1920: 26–27) The *kiremet* at Novoye Il’movo village in Cheremshanskiy district, RT, was located where respected villager Sarpai used to live (FM 2014b). In Atlashkino village, Aksubayevskiy district, RT, a local villager, Pikkal, was revered, who, according to legend, during mass Christianisation saved pagans from baptism: in the cage where his horse harness was once kept (Pikkal rode a troika), people threw money and offered the *Pikkāl kēlli* (‘a prayer to Pikkal’) prayer (SA CSIH 183: 8, 278: 9).

In the process of Christianisation, places revered in traditional religion were deliberately destroyed by adherents of Orthodoxy or were converted to Orthodox religious buildings. There are known cases of cutting down groves, kiremetisches, and the construction of chapels and churches on these prayer sites. In Novoye Yakushkino village, Buguruslanskiy district, a church was built from trees cut down in the kiremetishche



of neighbouring Shungut village. However, most villagers were scared by such actions because, in their opinion, they could cause misfortune. According to a local Orthodox priest, in Novoye Yakushkino “the Chuvash never started working there, fearing revenge from the terrible Kiremet” (Skvortsov 1905: 63). Such stories are found in various places and indicate the importance of sacred sites even after their exclusion from positive religious practice. The relevance of such sites stemmed from their prohibitions, violation of which, according to the Chuvash, was fraught with negative consequences. According to villagers’ stories in Saldakayevo village, Chistopol’skiy district in Kazan province, Kiremet ‘took revenge’ on the teacher and the village head by ‘killing’ their daughters because the two men burned birches in a sacred grove, dousing them with kerosene (SA CSHI 278: 58). Similar cases occurred during the Soviet era, in the course of the struggle against religious carry-overs. For example, in Staraya Sikhterma (Khu-zangayevo), Al’keyevskiy district of the RT, they decided to demolish the old cemetery, but no one dared to do it because of the threat of death that hung over the place. Then the chairman of the village council, a strong man, started digging, and a few days later cut himself with a razor and soon died of blood poisoning (FM 2003a).

At the turn of the 20th century the influence of missionary propaganda caused the Chuvash in most villages of the Samara Trans-Volga region to stop public pagan prayers, which local Orthodox priests constantly reported about (RSDC OMS 1898: 12–13; 1901: 66, 79). Over time, places of prayer were repurposed within the Orthodox cult. Thus, villagers in Lashmankino (Maloye Devlezerkino) village, Bugul’minskiy district, decided to serve public Orthodox prayers in the sacred grove of Kiremet (RSDC OMS 1897: 6–7). At the same time, according to the clergy, the number of visits to churches and occasional services ordered by the Chuvash increased greatly (RSDC OMS 1898: 13, 34–35). This eventually resulted in the church, generally located in the geographical centre of Chuvash villages, becoming its main sacred centre. The most significant village events took place there: christenings, weddings, funeral services, memorial services, festive services marking the community’s rhythm of life. This probably explains the start of church schools, and the construction of new church buildings in Chuvash villages in Samara province in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (CSASR: 356). Similar processes took place in villages where Chuvash who had converted to Islam lived, for example the villagers of Bulantamak village in Buguruslanskiy district who asked for a mosque to be built (RSDC OMS 1909: 14).

#### SACRED LOCI IN THE CONTEXT OF TRADITIONAL AND CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

Transformation of the religious life of the Chuvash under the influence of world religions (Christianity, Islam), the social and political processes of the 20th and early 21st centuries, and globalisation affected the functionality of sacred loci within contemporary ritual practices. Of most relevance are sacred objects associated with the Chuvash religion and located in the villages where few pagan communities live. As a minority in their villages, they perform rituals in traditional places on behalf of all villagers.

## Uchuk Locus

Places of community-wide prayer, *Uchuk*, were located, as a rule, to the east or south of the village, near water sources *chúĭk şyrmi* ('prayer river') or *uchuk var* ('uchuk ravine'), on the banks of rivers, near springs and streams, the water from which was used to cook sacrificial food (FM 1998: Yerilkino; 1999: Bol'shoje Mikushkino, Novoye Yakushkino). Thus, in Staroye Afon'kino village the *Uchuk* takes place annually on the banks of the river Bol'shoj Cheremshan (Photo 1), and the prayer to the deity Kiremet takes place in the Aprasin ravine, near a lonely growing willow (FM 1997a; 2015). The unbaptised Chuvash of Novoye Il'movo village organise the *Uchuk* on the banks of the river Bol'shaya Sul'cha on *uchuk tēmi* ('uchuk hill') (FM 2021a). In some villages, such a place was located at the head of the main river in the village, often in the forest, and the ritual was performed near the tree closest to the river bank (Benevolenskiy 1868a: 506). Trees growing at the *Uchuk* site became objects of veneration (the informants usually mention willows and birches) (SA CSlH 278: 9). Neighbouring villages performed *Uchuk* together (SA CSlH: 183; 190: 8). The same rule applied when holding a large prayer such as *Aslā chúĭk / Pysāk chúĭk*, and sacrifices to the deity of the order *Hāt - Hāt chúĭk* (SA CSlH 278: 88).



Photo 1. *Uchuk* on the banks of the river Bol'shoj Cheremshan in Staroye Afon'kino village, Shentalinskiy district, Samara region. Photo by Iagafova, 2015.

## Kiremet *Locus*

The place of prayer, *kiremet*, is a ravine, a hillock near the ravine, a tract in the forest. Single trees such as birches and willows were revered (SA CSIH 6: 398, 463). In some cases, the site was located to the west of the village (Staroye Afon'kino, Savgachevo of Aksubayevskiy district of the RT), in others to the east (Starogan'kino in Pokhvistnevskiy district, Samara region; see Photo 2) (FM 1996; 1997a). A peculiarity of *kiremetishches* was that prayers to the main deity of the Chuvash *Turā* were never held on this territory (Salmin 2007: 407). The *kiremetishches* of the Samara Chuvash were not fenced off, but in the past there was probably a fence and a small house, as the villagers of Ivashkino village of Cheremshanskiy district of the RT reported to the participants of the ethnographic expedition in 1984 (SA CSIH: 183, 190, 278).



Photo 2. Kiremet in Starogan'kino village, Pokhvistnevskiy district, Samara region. Photo by Iagafova, 2021.

Kiremetishches of the Trans-Kama and Trans-Volga Chuvash were first described in the 1770s by famous travellers Lepekhin and Pallas. This is how Lepekhin (1771: 162–164) described them:

The place of worship of the Chuvash is called Irzyam, and that of the Mordva is Kiremet. And it is nothing more than a quadrangular square, palisaded or fenced with stand-stacks; and it has three gates from the east, west and north; from the



east they bring their sacrificial cattle, people enter the western gate and water is brought through the northern gate. They do not know the reasons, but they say they received it from their ancestors. Not far from the eastern gate, three poles are dug in, a sacrificial horse is tied to one, a bull or a cow is tied to another, and sheep are tied to the third, and these poles are called Turzhigan. Three more poles are dug in at the western gate, called Yuba in their language. After bringing the sacrificial cattle, they first tied it to the eastern poles, where they sell the skins of small animals, in addition to selling larger animals such as horses, and buying salt with this money for future prayers. To the side of the western gate, a barnyard or a mow is built, in the middle of which two little poles with a cross-member are dug in so that it is convenient to hang cauldrons for boiling slaughtered animals; and this place is called haray-zhigat, i.e. kitchen. There is a shelf or a wide bench at the northern gate, where they tear the cooked meat into as many pieces as there are pilgrims, and this bench is called huma.

Pallas (1773: 140) supplements this description as follows:

Near the western gate, a lid is made on poles, under which the sacrificed meat is cooked, in front of which sacrificial wafers and some other food is placed on a large table. Near the north gate there is another large table where the slaughtered sacrifice is dressed out and skinned. In the northern corner, palings are dug into the ground, on which cattle skins are hung.

An old man looked after the kiremetishche; the villagers did not clean their houses until they cleaned the kiremetishche (SA CSIH 278: 16).

In villages, there could be not one, but several kiremetishes. For example, in Chuvashskaya Mencha village of Nurlatskiy district of the RT, there were two of them, *tirēkle hāva* (poplar) and *Tumenday hāvi* (Tumenday's willow) (SA CSIH 6: 345); both named after a revered willow. In Sidulovo-Yerykly village of Aksubayevskiy district, there were three kiremetishches: a 'senior' *kiremet* in a ravine, a 'middle' one near the cemetery, and a 'junior' one near neighbouring Ishal'kino village, from where the villagers had moved (SA CSIH 278: 25). The second kiremetishche also existed in Staroye Afon'kino village, it was located to the south, on the border with neighbouring villages (FM 2021b). This was also the case with other regions where the Chuvash lived (Salmin 2007: 407). In ethnically mixed villages, the Chuvash had sacred sites on 'their' side of the village (FM 2008a; 2014a).

Along with public ones, there were also 'home' kiremetishches. Pallas (1773: 140) wrote about this in the 18th century: "every family, or relative, has a special little kiremet for the sacrifice". In Starogan'kino village in the 1960s two such places were located in half-ruined basements, which therefore could not be renovated. The owner of one of these basements was *kiremet Kuşmi* ('Kiremet's Kuzma'). Family members were also associated with kiremetishches. When someone from the family got married, a similar marriage ritual was performed with the Kiremet. If a person died, then the Kiremet died as well (SA CSIH: 183; 190). Today nobody remembers these places in Starogan'kino (FM 2021c).

## Uyav / Vāyā Locus

Kiremetishches are associated with the *Uyav* / *Vāyā* spring and summer games of the Trans-Volga Chuvash. Thus, villagers of Staroye Afon'kino started *Uyav* in the Aprasin ravine, in Bol'shoye Mikushkino village they sang and danced on the hill of *kiremet sārchē* ('kiremet's hill'); another place was *Pikel tu* ('Pikel mountain'). In Novoye Yakushkino village, it also took place on the *chike tu* hill ('border hill') (FM 1997a; 1999).

A special place near Chuvash villages of the Samara Trans-Volga and Trans-Kama regions is occupied by the places of 'meeting' and 'seeing off' *Uyav*, i.e. spring and summer round dances and festive gathering of young people (Photo 3). As a rule, the meeting place was located to the west of the village, and the seeing-off place was to the east of it (FM 2005a: Savgachevo; 1997b; 1997c; 2001). Thus, the villagers, as it were, brought *Uyav* to the village from one side, and saw it off to the other side. However, in some villages, both loci could be located on the western side (FM 1999: Novoye Yakushkino; 2003a).



Photo 3. Seeing off *Uyav*. Devlezerkino village, Chelno-Vershinskiy district, Samara region. Photo by Iagafova, 2008.

Most often, *Uyav* finished in a rye field, a border between rural community possessions (FM 2002a; 2005a: Yerepkino). The borderland was generally considered a bad place. In the field one could not lie down on the border; it was also forbidden to stand or sit on

a house threshold. At the village outskirts, villagers saw off recruits and greeted guests for the holidays. According to Eliade (1994: 25), for a religious person these barriers are “symbols and means of transition” from the temporal to the sacred and back. The border outlined the limits of ‘one’s own’, explored, and ‘alien’, unknown space. The border with neighbouring villages and the space outside the village was considered especially dangerous. On the common border, people of several villages held a ‘big prayer’ *Pysāk chūk* once every several years (SA CSH 278: 17, 43). Behind the outskirts, on the cemetery side, participants in the evil spirit exorcism ritual *Sēren* gathered (FM 2000). A wedding train called here on the way back from the bride’s house to the groom’s house. The guests performed the ritual *hayar ukši pārahni* or *mul ukši pārahni* (‘throwing evil money’): having gone around the place by the sun in carts and on horseback, they dismounted, faced east, prayed, ate a memorial meal and then, throwing a coin, went to visit their relatives. Relatives saw off recruits to the outskirts. This tradition still exists, as well as some elements of the wedding ceremony (the custom of visiting the cemetery, and in some villages the ritual of throwing evil money). Over time, such places could be built up with residential buildings, but, according to local people, their inhabitants suffered from misfortunes (FM 1998: Staroye Semēnkino).

Related villages, as a rule, organise public merrymaking at their mutual border. Such a place for the villagers of Staroye Rezyapkino, Chernyy Klyuch, Zelenyy Klyuch and Usakla, all in Klyavlińskiy district, Samara region, was a meadow on the bank of the river Bol’shoy Cheremshan, located to the east of the mother village Staroye Rezyapkino (FM 1998). In the Bavlinskiy cluster of villages,<sup>6</sup> young people’s round dances and merrymaking were also held on the common border every Sunday and for the last time on St. Peter’s day; due to the location they were called ‘border’ dances (*misha*; FM 2002b). Currently, public merrymaking and round dances are not held in the villages mentioned. A farewell ceremony, *Uyav / Vāyā*, is included in the actual ritual space only in Chuvash villages of Koshkinskiy, Chelno-Verzhinskiy, partially in the Shentalinskiy district of the Samara region and neighbouring districts of the RT (FM 2021a; 2021b; 2021d; 2021e; 2021f).

During the *Uyav / Vāyā* ceremony, there were also 4–5 other places in the village where games and dances were performed. Hence, they were called *vāyā* place. These dances were in every street, in the centre of the village or in an open area within the village (FM 1996: Sredneye Averkino, Maloye Ibryaykino). However, it is difficult to call them sacred points in Chuvash villages since they were associated with rituals only situationally, just like, for example, the hills near the village, on which young people lit Easter fires (*Munkun* hill) or danced on *Simēk*<sup>7</sup> (*Simēk* hill) (FM 1995; 2002b). In the same setting, the barn and the cage became sacred when rituals were performed there. The ‘iron fence’ (*timēr karta*) drawn around the farmstead on the night of *Munkun*<sup>8</sup> or around the village if there was an epidemic was seen as sacred (SA CSH 173: 243). However, these temporary loci and lines reinforced the sacredness of what was ‘one’s own’. In modern cult practice, these loci are inactive, even if the villagers remember them.

## Water Sources

Water sources within the village such as rivers and springs had a sacred status in the context of rituals. People took water from them for New Year's fortune telling, to wash the deceased, having thrown in in return several coarse threads and coins. A bride was sent to these sources for water on the second day of the wedding. She donated several coins as a sign of communion with the spirits of water, and cooked bride's soup and treated her husband's relatives (FM 1995; 1996; 2002a). Indirectly, ravines, rivers, tracts, the spirits of which people sacrificed cakes to during *Uchuk* were included in the sacred space. For example, in Novoye Aksubayevo, four ravines were mentioned in a prayer: *Il'met şyrmi* (Ilmet's ravine), *Pērenke şyrmi* (Perenke's ravine), *yērēh şyrmi* (the ravine where the deity *Yērēkh* lived), *Pakhcha şyrmi* (the ravine in the orchard) (FM 2002a). In every road in the villages of the unbaptised Chuvash, as well as in some villages of the baptized Chuvash, there are also places to pray for rain using the *Şumār chūk / Şerşi chūk* (prayer for rain/sparrow sacrifice). As a rule, they are located near a water source. Such places can be marked by trees such as spruce (Staryye Savrushy in Aksubayevskiy district) or willows (Staroye Afon'kino). *Şumār chūk* could be performed at the border of two villages if they were related, i.e. one of them was founded by the descendants of the other (FM 1998: Staroye Semenkino).

In contemporary rituality, water sources are relevant only in the context of memorial rituality, but not in all villages; the prayer for rain is situational and is mainly held in the villages of the unbaptised Chuvash. Rituals associated with local spirits are not practiced.

## A Cemetery and Other Loci of Funeral and Memorial Rituals

A number of sacred objects near Chuvash villages are associated with funeral and memorial rituals. In the ravine separating the village from the cemetery, people threw basts on which the deceased had been laid and washed. Hence, the place was named *hup pārahnā var* ('place of throwing basts') (Photo 4). During the ritual of erecting a grave pole of *yupa*, a wooden table and a chair (*ten'kelli-sētelli*) were placed on the cemetery side of the ravine. At the same time, 'walkways' – split logs about one metre long – were laid next to the ravine (FM 1997a). When the funeral procession passed this conventional border between the village and the cemetery, people threw a red-hot stone to the bottom of the ravine (FM 2003b: Staroye Surkino). These rituals are still being performed. There are similar ritual places near other unbaptised Chuvash village located in neighbouring areas in the RT. For example, in Novoye Serēzhkino village of Leninogorskiy district, RT, in the absence of a natural border between the village and the cemetery, people dug a moat where the same rituals as in Staroye Afon'kino are performed (FM 2009). In a number of villages in Nurlatskiy and Aksubayevskiy districts of the RT, *ten'kelli-sētelli* are placed at the entrance to the cemetery or directly on the graves (FM 2005a; 2021a).





*Photo 4. Hup pārahnā var Ravine in Staroye Afon'kino village, Shentalinskiy district, Samara region. Photo by Iagafova, 2021.*

One of the most significant sacred objects of any Chuvash village is the cemetery. Traditionally, it was located across a water border from the village, from which comes the toponym 'Cemetery River' (*masar şyrmi*) found in a number of villages (FM 2021f). In their absence, the orientation of the cemetery to the north or west of the village is preserved. In old Chuvash villages of the Samara Trans-Volga region, which have existed for about 300 years, several cemetery locations are known. Some of them, due to the territorial expansion of the village, turned out to be inside, but are mentioned by the villagers, such as, for example, cemetery hollow in Bol'shoye Mikushkino. On the site of another cemetery in the centre of the village, a church was built, and in the Soviet period there was a club there (FM 1999). In Devlezerkino, the parish clergy and members of their families were also buried in the village centre next to the church, after the demolition of which a house of culture was built nearby. Currently, a worship cross is erected on the site of the church (FM 2020).

The cemeteries of the unbaptised Chuvash were separated from the cemeteries of other confessions by a fence or a rampart, and this arrangement has been kept up today. So, in Novoye Il'movo, pagan and Orthodox cemeteries are located side by side, but behind a fence; in Staroye Afon'kino they are within the same fence, but separated by a rampart. In Staroye Surkino, three cemeteries – pagan, Christian and Muslim – are located at a distance of several hundred metres from each other (Photo 5). In Savgachevo, a pagan cemetery is located on the western outskirts of the village, while a



Christian one is to the north (FM 2001; 2003b; 2005b; 2021e). In confessionally mixed villages, the tradition to bury baptised and unbaptised Chuvash relatives in the same cemetery is gradually spreading, which breaks the tradition of physically delimiting the sacred space of different confessions. Therefore, on the days of commemoration of ancestors, both baptised and unbaptised Chuvash visit both cemeteries together. However, this trend of joint rituals of Christians and pagans is characteristic not only of the memorial cult, but also of public prayers of the Chuvash (FM 2021a; 2021b).



*Photo 5. Muslim cemetery of Staroye Surkino village, Al'met'yevskiy district, RT. Photo by Iagafova, 2010.*

In a number of Chuvash villages, mainly those of the unbaptised, the ritual of 'seeing off the soul' is preserved, usually held on the 40th day after death. In the evening after the memorial meal, some of the treats are taken to a special place where people light a fire, stand in a circle, sing, 'see off the soul', and 'join' it to the previously deceased relatives. There is such a place either in the north or west end of every village street but never on the east side (FM 2005a: Yerepkino, Nizhniye Savrushki). Usually it is located in a side-street where people do not usually walk (FM 2005a: Savgachevo).

Places for performing funeral rituals are also located within the farmstead or around it. Some of the sacrificial gifts, specially taken from the funeral meal to ritually 'feed' the ancestors, are taken out into the street to the gate pole from the outside of the courtyard or from the shrine outside of the house. This is the place where sacrificial animals and birds are slaughtered (FM 2002a: Novoye Aksubayevo; 2003a: Verkhniye Matakki; 2003b: Klementeykino; FM 2005a: Savgachevo, Nizhniye Savrushki).

Within the farmstead, the unbaptised Chuvash have a place for sacrifices, which, as a rule, is located at the gate pole from the inner part of the yard, where poultry is slaughtered. It is forbidden to use gross language and desecrate this place in every possible way, for example to go to the toilet, pour dirty water, hit it with a stick. The place was chosen in such a way that the sacrificers could see the rising sun. Therefore, the 'clean place' (*tasa vyrān*) was located in the eastern part of the farmstead (FM 2002a: Novoye Aksubayevo; 2003a: Verkhniye Matak; 2003b: Klementeykino; 2005a: Nizhniye Savrush).).

### *Yērēh Locus*

In addition to other sacred places in Chuvash villages places associated with the deity of the hearth *Yērēh* are also preserved.<sup>9</sup> The informants say that the owners of farmsteads located near the places where the deity lived, looked after them, but they cannot always indicate these places. Since *Yērēh* was a clan deity, he didn't live in every house but rather in the 'main' house of the clan, where other clan members came with a sacrifice, for example small *yusman* cakes spread with melted butter and honey (SA CSH 207: 69–70; Benevolenskiy 1868b: 252).

According to legends, *Yērēh* lived in the attic of a house or in a cage and could move to a new place along with the house if it was moved, but more often he remained in his place even after demolition of the house. And then this place was marked by people as the abode of *Yērēh*. For desecrating a place, the deity could send damage or skin diseases to the violator. The retribution of *Yērēh* differed in the degree of severity of punishment: some of them were said to be 'strong' (FM 1996: Starogan'kino; 1999: Bol'shoje Mikushkino; 2021b).

In addition to the clan's revered places, there were also all-village revered places associated with this deity, the village *yērēh* (*yal yērēh*) (SA CSH 278: 30). The toponymic names *yērēh kulkki* ('grove *yērēh*') (FM 2021g), *yērēh yāmri* ('white willow *yērēh*') (SA CSH 278: 45) remind us of this. Contemporary practices related to *Yērēh* were recorded during the expedition in 2021 in the village of Staroye Afon'kino. According to legend, in the past there were 11 places of this kind in the village, but today the villagers know only some of them. The owners of farmsteads where the abode of *Yērēh* is located, from time to time 'jolly *Yērēh* along' with small treats such as sweets or cookies (FM 2021b).

### *'Dangerous' Places and Prohibitions*

Dangerous places also existed inside the village. In the absence of natural markers, they were marked with a high carved *yupa* pole. In Verkhnyaya Kondrata, Chistopol'skiy district, RT, people finished *Uyav* near such a pole sticking small coins into it (FM 2008a).

The cardinal direction of the sacred places is related to their characteristics. Thus, the east was associated with the cult of the sun, with warmth, the birth of life, so places of worship and sacrifices were located in the east. In a number of cases, as Salmin notes, a synonym for east was south, which had a similar semantic meaning with the concepts of warmth and good. In contrast, the west was associated with the negative forces of

nature, and symbolised death, exodus, tragedy. Hence, there comes orientation of cemeteries, kiremetishches and other objects in relation to the village; *Uyav* was seen off to the west. The north is semantically close to the west. (Salmin 2007: 503–507)

The sacredness of places of prayers is supported by a variety of prohibitions, which strictly regulated visiting ritual places. One should not visit places of prayers on weekdays, and not desecrate them. Visiting the cemetery was forbidden on ritual days (with the exception of commemoration) (FM 2000; 2005b). It was forbidden to approach the place of *Kiremet* outside the ritual time, otherwise the deity who lived in this place could ‘grab’, that is, send disease onto violators. It was also forbidden to take money or other sacrificial gifts from this place, as well as to cut down trees. Those who appeared near *kiremet* were forbidden to use obscene language, fight, and generally desecrate this place with unworthy behaviour (FM 1997a). In the place of *Uchuk*, it was also forbidden to use obscene language, to pronounce rude words, to talk, and men could not wear a hat (Salmin 2016: 30, 560). Similar prohibitions were also true of the places of living of deity *Yērēh* (FM 2021b).

Strict prohibitions were also observed when the rituals were performed irregularly or stopped altogether. At the entrance to Saldakayevo village of Nurlatskiy district, RT, there is a place of *kartallā yrā* (‘agathodemon’s fenced dwelling’) (Photo 6), where people of this and neighbouring villages traditionally came once a year to Ascension and buried sacrificial money from home prayers. At the same time, on ordinary days, villagers were forbidden to go into the fenced area, and when passing by, they could not look in that direction, otherwise, they said, it would ‘grab’; and the violator could get sick and even die. Similar prohibitions were also true to the chapel. They are still relevant for villagers today, although they no longer perform rituals at this sanctuary (FM 2008b).<sup>10</sup>

Trees at the place of prayers were considered sacred, they could not be cut down. From an interview with Sergey Mikhaylovich Vasil’yev, born in 1935, a resident of Staryye Savrushy, Aksubayevskiy district, RT, on the prayer for rain:

There were three fir trees, now only one is left. I wanted to cut it one day, but one old man stopped me, and I didn’t. He told me: “Nobody has ever touched it, and don’t you dare.” There is still my incision on it. But the fir tree had already fallen down. (FM 2005a)

However, over time, prohibitive measures could be revised. *Kiremet* in the same village was cut down after the chairman of the village council recovered from the illness sent, according to the villagers, by a deity for being the first to cut down trees in the sacred grove and build a house: “People began to chop and mow hay more courageously. Soon the place was ploughed up.” (SA CSH 278: 30)

The sacredness of cemeteries in the perception of local people is supported by many prohibitions on their behaviour in this place: one cannot visit it in the afternoon, especially in the evening, one cannot come alone, desecrate graves, use obscene language. It is also forbidden to pick and eat berries and fruit,<sup>11</sup> and feed pets with grass cut from the graves. One ought to bring food or drinks and commemorate the ancestors; and before entering the cemetery one should sacrifice to the head of the cemetery. The ritual of visiting a cemetery in some villages includes throwing coins at the entrance and exit and an obligatory appeal to the spirits of the deceased with a request to forgive for the disturbance (FM 2021d: Saldakayevo).



Photo 6. Kartallā yrā in Saldakayevo village, Nurlatskiy district, Republic of Tatarstan. Photo by Iagafova, 2008.

Trees grow in the Chuvash cemeteries. People believe that you can plant a rowan or viburnum in place of a fallen cross. According to another legend, trees on the graves are undesirable, since, as the Chuvash believe, they put roots around bodies of the deceased and prevent them from 'breathing'. In addition, villagers disagree on the issue of mowing in the cemetery: supporters of order believe that mowing is possible and necessary, while adherents of tradition argue that neither trees nor grass can be cut in the cemetery, and explain it by the fact that the mowers seem to pull the deceased by the hair. It is also forbidden to throw away the fallen crosses, as everything must decay by itself. (FM 1999: Sukhari Matak)

General behavioural prohibitions (going to the toilet, obscene language, etc.) were also observed at the place of giving *hyvny* (literally 'relieve', 'reward') at the gate pole (FM 2005a: Nizhniye Savrushu).

Some prohibitions also concerned the participation of 'outsiders', people of other villages, representatives of other peoples and confessions, who were forbidden from taking part in some rituals such as *Sēren*<sup>12</sup> or *Uchuk*. They were to protect the sacred space of 'one's own' village or community. However, in modern practices, especially in ethnically and confessionally mixed villages, this prohibition is not only broken, but co-participation of Orthodox Christians and even Muslims is approved, especially in public sacrifices *Uchuk* (FM 2021d).



## *Ours and Theirs*

Most of the sacred places are associated with the Chuvash ethnic tradition and are places of living of Chuvash deities and spirits. However, in the space of Chuvash villages there are revered and protected places associated with the former inhabitants of the area the Kalmyks and Bashkirs. On a hill in Isaklinskiy district in the Samara region there is a Bashkir cemetery (FM 1999). On the southern outskirts of Devlezerkino, the Kalmyk ravine stream flows, where, according to legend, a young Kalmyk woman died. This place is considered dangerous as on the road passing by the stream traffic tragic accidents occur from time to time (FM 2020). There is a Kalmyk cemetery near Novoye Il'movo village (Photo 7); it is fenced, there are four poles installed in the corners. Villagers do not plough in this place; according to their reports, tractors stalled when trying to do so. The villagers visit this place every year and make a sacrifice of food and drinks, considering it their duty: "The Kalmyks lived here before us, their bones lie here. Our mothers bequeathed to us to remember them." (FM 2021a)



*Photo 7. Kalmyk cemetery near Novoye Il'movo village, Cheremshanskiy district, RT. Photo by Iagafova, 2021.*



The preservation of sacred objects in Chuvash villages of the Samara Trans-Volga region and the attitude towards them differ depending on the size of the confessional group and the prevailing religious practices. In a number of villages, the places of *Uchuk* are abandoned, as, for example, in Yerilkino village of Klyavlinskiy district, where the villagers wash linen on the river bank (FM 1998). *Kiremet* next to Bol'shoye Mikushkino village of Isaklinskiy district has been dug up, and the trees have been cut down, but the villagers still remember it and, passing by, they recollect it, saying, *Kiremet* will 'disable' us (*Kiremet puşlâhe tytsa hutlat*), our legs or head may hurt (FM 1999). The *kiremet* oak grove near Sidulovo-Yerykly village of Aksubayevskiy district has survived fragmentarily, most trees were struck by lightning, but on one of the remaining trees the villagers tie colourful ribbons and rags. Thus, a new tradition of venerating a cult place has appeared here (FM 2021e).

The places of prayer of *Uchuk* and *Şumâr chûk* were preserved in some villages due to the fact that in the Soviet period rituals were held there with the tacit permission or even approval of the local agricultural enterprise authorities interested in timely precipitation and favourable weather conditions. Moreover, the baptised Chuvash performed similar actions, replacing the texts of Chuvash prayers with Orthodox ones (FM 2021e: Urmandeyevo). For example, in times of drought villagers in Bol'shoye Mikushkino went to the Surgut river (horses were borrowed from the collective farm) and, having taken water from there, went to the Blue Lake, poured out the water they had brought<sup>13</sup> and held a small prayer service. According to the informants' recollections, it really rained after that (FM 1999). The unbaptised Chuvash, in the main, still conduct prayers today, which are approved and supported not only by the Orthodox neighbours, but by the Muslims as well (FM 2021ae).

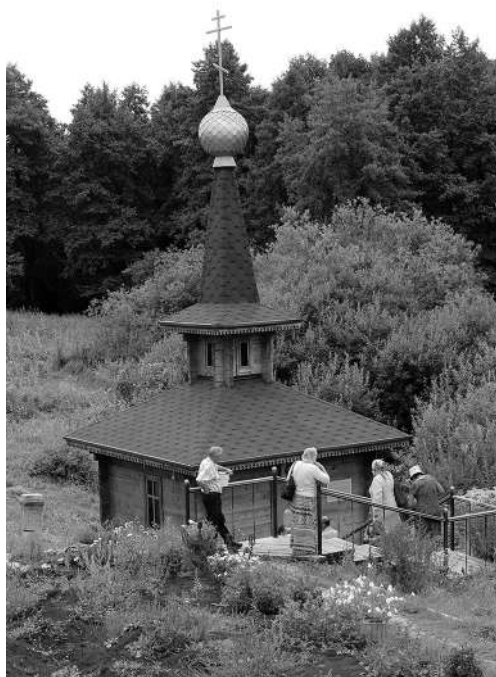
In most villages, places of Chuvash prayers no longer function, they are remembered only through toponyms containing such words as *chûk*, *uchuk*, *yr / yrsem*: *chûk şyrmi* (a small river), *uchuk var* (a ravine), *uchuk kassi* (a street), *kiṽe uchuk* (old), *şēnē uchuk* (new). In recent years, people have been landscaping these places, such as, for example, *Sultanyr* (a local name for the place of a prayer for rain and the dwelling of agathodemon Sultan) in the village of Boriskino-Igar, Kl'yavlinskiy district (FM 2021g).

In the villages of Orthodox Chuvash their exposure to Christianity caused the appearance of new cult objects such as churches, chapels, holy springs. The latter were often built on the sites of traditional prayers, and churches were mainly built in the centre of villages. In Verkhnyaya Kondrata, the chapel (Photo 8) was built on the site of the pagan pole of *yupa*, near which the Chuvash and their neighbours, the Kryashens,<sup>14</sup> traditionally celebrate *Uyav* and Trinity, i.e. the rituals associated with redemption and cleaning up of evil, disease, misfortune, etc. Over time, the pole rotted away and one day a local woman N. demolished it and built a house in this place, but she fell ill. On the advice of the old villagers, she 'restored' the *yupa* in the form of a stone Orthodox chapel. Local people claim that prayers and sacrifices at the chapel help them. (FM 2008a) A chapel for sacrificial gifts was built at the entrance to Saldakayevo village in Nurlatskiy district, RT (Photo 9), but today it has been moved to the cemetery, where both baptised and unbaptised Chuvash visitors leave sacrificial gifts (FM 2021d).



Photo 8. Chapel in Verkhnyaya Kondrata village, Chistopol'skiy district, RT. Photo by Iagafova, 2008.  
Photo 9. Chapel in Saldakayevo village, Nurlatskiy district, RT. Photo by Iagafova, 2021.

Since the end of the 20th century in the Chuvash villages of the Samara region there has been an active restoration of Orthodox parishes, accompanied by the construction of churches and chapels. Over the past 30 years, 18 parishes have been opened and 16 churches have been restored. Currently, construction of churches is underway in three villages. Along with the churches, springs are being landscaped and consecrated in the villages, and fountains and chapels are arranged near them. This is often due to the transformation of traditional places of prayers. In 2018 in Devlezerkino village, a spring was cleared, near which in the 19th century the villagers held a prayer *Uchuk*, and at the beginning of the 20th century Orthodox prayer services were held; in 1903 a chapel was built here (Photo 10). During the clearing, the spring was consecrated in honour of St. Panteleimon, and a new large chapel with a fountain was built over it. The restored object of worship has become both a place of pilgrimage for people of neighbouring villages and neighbouring districts of the region, and a source of healing water, according to local people. Here the water is blessed for Epiphany (January 19) and on the day of St. Panteleimon (August 9) (FM 2021f). In most Chuvash villages of the Samara region, worship crosses are erected on the site of churches or at the entrance to the village, which, according to the villagers, are designed to protect the village from natural disasters and accidents (FM 2021c; 2021f). Thus, over the past three decades, in the Chuvash villages of the Samara Trans-Volga region, the sacred space has been formed in line with the Orthodox tradition, while often there is a 'reformatting' of pagan sacred objects into Christian ones. Sacred objects are often actualised depending on personal circumstances (such as illness) or production needs (drought, etc.), while traditionally functioning as a sacred place. However, the appearance of a new locus is often associ-



*Photo 10. Chapel in honour of St. Panteleimon. Devlezerkino village, Chelno-Vershinskiy district, Samara region. Photo by Iagafova, 2020.*

ated with a social trend. To a large extent, they perform a presentation role, being the village's visiting card and a source of pride for local people: "Here we have a church/a holy spring" or "And we have *Uchuk* being held here" (FM 2021a; 2021f).

A completely different type of cult site is associated with the events of the civil history of the 20th century. In a number of Chuvash villages there are monuments to local heroes who died at the hands of kulaks during the years of collectivisation, but they are not inscribed in modern ritual practice. During the second half of the 20th century many memorials to the soldiers who died during the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) were established there. They are located in the centre of every village. As a rule, these are sculptures or steles containing symbolic images of warriors with the names of the villagers who died in the battlefield. Every year, on the eve or on Victory Day (May 9), the villagers lay flowers and wreaths at the monument and hold mourning ceremonies near it. The sacredness of monuments of this

type is based, of course, on the memory of descendants of the fallen fellow villagers, but it is supported thanks to the administrative resource, since caring for the monuments and holding events are included into the plans of the village administration, school, and the club. However, the administrative resource is also involved in other cases, such as improvement of cemeteries and springs, construction of churches and chapels, which indicates the importance of these objects not only in the religious, but also in the public life of the Chuvash village (FM 2021a–g).

## CONCLUSION

Sacred sites make up an integral part of the religious space of the Chuvash villages of the Samara Trans-Volga region, helping to set its spatial coordinates. The formation of the sacred landscape occurred alongside development of new lands, during which the traditional model of the microcosm of the Chuvash peasant farmer was reproduced, the model of the world inhabited by good and evil spirits and deities who needed regular sacrifices, and their habitats needed respectful attitude from people. The sacred objects reflect both general ethnic traditions and local and historical plots associated with a specific area and local people.

In the Samara Trans-Volga region, there are different types of sacred site: 1) natural sites (springs, rivers, hills, forest areas) that have never been developed by man or have undergone minimal change; 2) natural sites that have been developed by man and transformed within ritual practices (trees with amulets, fenced venerated places, holy springs); 3) sites created by man, but included in the natural environment (churches, chapels, cemeteries); 4) monuments associated with social and political events in the history of the country (monuments to those killed in the Great Patriotic War, etc.)

The transformation of religious life as a result of Christianisation (18th–early 20th centuries), social transformations in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods resulted, on the one hand, in a significant decrease in the functionality of sacred objects in the region, and on the other hand, in the appearance of new, mainly Orthodox, sites in Chuvash villages. One can also note the revitalisation of traditional places of prayer of the unbaptised Chuvash. In the 20th–early 21st centuries, in accordance with a general tendency of strengthening Christian principles in the culture of the Samara Chuvash, there was a partial change in the confessional affiliation of the sacred loci from pagan to Orthodox. Cult sites associated with the events of civil history are significant in the life of society as well.

Chuvash villagers perceive sacred sites mainly as a negative cult (Durkheim 2018), i.e. as associated with prohibitions on what one should not do there, while positive practices were in most cases lost or reproduced in reduced forms.

An important factor in the preservation of the sacred space of Chuvash villages is the historical memory addressed both to the ancestors and to the village founders. The cult of the ancestors, which is still significant in the religious practice of the Chuvash, ensures the preservation of some sacred loci. This also applies to sites related to events in the civil history of the 20th century.

The study showed that sacred objects are mainly inscribed in modern religious practices and public life of the Chuvash villages of the Samara Trans-Volga region, and associated behavioural norms are relevant in everyday life, which, in general, undoubtedly contribute to the consolidation of rural society and the preservation and transmission of ethnocultural traditions.

## NOTES

1 By ‘sacred objects’ we mean, first of all, natural and man-made parts of the physical space and facilities located on this territory, which have the status of a sacred place. The sacralisation of an object is associated with its transfer from everyday experience into a special sphere protected by prohibitions and regulations (Zabiyako 2012: 129).

2 The Chuvash are a Turkic-speaking people living in the territory of the Russian Federation, mainly in the republics of the Volga-Ural region. According to the 2010 census, the population was 1.4 million people, including 1.3 million people in the Ural-Volga region. (Dianov 2012: 72)

3 The Chuvash from the villages of contemporary Aksubayevskiy and Nurlatskiy districts of the RT went there annually for the Christian holiday of Ascension and made a sacrifice (sheep, birds, money); many fulfilled a vow made during illness. The Chuvash performed the ritual on Friday and Saturday, while the Tatars prayed there on Wednesday and Thursday and Russians on Sunday and the next 2–3 days. At the beginning of the 20th century 7,000–8,000 people gathered there on the Exaltation. (SA CSH 183, 190: 6, 278: 44, 49–50, 57–58)



4 The settlers were probably from the neighbourhood of Chuvashskaya Sorma village (Surām in Chuvash) in contemporary Alikovskiy region in the Chuvash Republic.

5 *Krasnyy Yar* means the deity of the earth fertility in translation (Salmin 2007: 429).

6 Chuvash villages Alekseyevka, Potapovo-Tumbarly, Vas'kino Tuyraly in Bavlinskiy district, RT belonged to Bugul'minskiy district in Samara province in the 19th–early 20th centuries.

7 *Simēk* is a memorial ritual performed by the Chuvash on the Thursday or Saturday before Trinity. After visiting the cemetery, relatives paid visits to each other and the youth danced in a round.

8 Chuvash 'Easter' is celebrated by unbaptised Chuvash on the Wednesday before Orthodox Easter.

9 Perhaps this is due to the large-scale destruction of *Yērēh* by local Orthodox priests: "he destroyed 10 *Yērēhs*", wrote N. Alexandrov, priest of Potapovo-Tumbarly village, Bugul'minskiy district, Samara province in 1895 (CSA 501: 189b). The deacon of one of the churches in Bugur-slanskiy district forced the owner of the "*irih*" to throw the wooden idol into the fire (Ivanov 1895: 633). Similar cases have been noted in other places (RSDC OMS 1901: 66; 1903: 5–6). According to the priest in another case, the Chuvash asked to destroy the "*irih*" and sprinkle holy water on the barn, otherwise they would burn the idols themselves (RSDC OMS 1904: 30).

10 At the same time, prohibitions applied only to the villagers. When the expedition members asked if they did the right thing visiting those revered places, the answer was: "Nothing will happen to you, even if you took pictures. [...] You can do that, you were on an excursion" (FM 2008b).

11 Alternatively, you can eat it, but you cannot bring it home (FM 1999: Sukhari Matak).

12 The ritual of the expulsion of spirits after the spring commemoration of the ancestors, held in the evening of the day after *Munkun*.

13 Karst lake in neighbouring Sergiyevskiy district, Samara region.

14 The Kryashens are an ethnic and confessional group within the Tatars who profess Orthodoxy. They live mainly in the RT, in small numbers in the Republic of Bashkortostan and the Udmurt Republic, as well as in the Chelyabinsk, the Samara and the Kirov regions. The origin of the group is a debatable issue; both Turkic-speaking and Finno-Ugric peoples took part in its formation. The process of Christianisation in the Urals-Volga region in the 16th–18th centuries, as well as the subsequent Christianisation in the 19th and early 20th centuries, was of decisive influence. According to the 2010 census, 35,822 Kryashens live in Russia (see Dianov 2012: 88).

## SOURCES

CSA = Chuvash State Archives, Cheboksary

CSA, fund 501, case 189b.

CSASR = Central State Archives of the Samara Region, Samara

CSASR, fund 356, cases 335, 345, 355, 352.

FM = Ekaterina Igafova's fieldwork materials from 1998–2020. Materials are kept in the author's possession.

FM 1995 = Samara region, Klyavlinskiy district (Boriskino-Igar village).

FM 1996 = Samara region, Pokhivistnevskiy district (Maloye Ibryaykino, Sredneye Averkino, Starogan'kino villages).

FM 1997a = Samara region, Shentalinskiy district (Staroye Afon'kino village).

FM 1997b = Republic of Tatarstan, Nurlatskiy district (Aksumla village).

FM 1997c = Samara region, Koshkinskiy district (Chuvashskaya Vasil'yevka village).

FM 1998 = Samara region, Klyavlinskiy district (Yerilkino, Staroye Semēnkino, Staroye Rezyap-kino villages).



- FM 1999 = Samara region, Isaklinskiy district (Bol'shoye Mikushkino, Novoye Yakushkino, Sukhari Matak villages).
- FM 2000 = Samara region, Shentalinskiy district (Staroye Afon'kino village).
- FM 2001 = Samara region, Shentalinskiy district (Staroye Afon'kino village).
- FM 2002a = Republic of Tatarstan, Aksubayevskiy district (Belovka, Novoye Aksubayevo, Staroye Timoshkino villages).
- FM 2002b = Republic of Tatarstan, Bavlinskiy district (Alekseyevka village).
- FM 2003a = Republic of Tatarstan, Al'keyevskiy district (Khuzangayevo, Verkhniye Mataki villages).
- FM 2003b = Republic of Tatarstan, Al'met'yevskiy district (Klementeykino, Staroye Surkino villages).
- FM 2005a = Republic of Tatarstan, Aksubayevskiy district (Nizhniye Savrushki, Savgachevo, Staroye Savrushki, Urmandeyevo, Yerepkino villages).
- FM 2005b = Republic of Tatarstan, Cheremshanskiy district (Novoye Il'movo village).
- FM 2008a = Republic of Tatarstan, Chistopol'skiy district (Verkhnyaya Kondrata village).
- FM 2008b = Republic of Tatarstan, Nurlatskiy district (Saldakayevo village).
- FM 2009 = Republic of Tatarstan, Leninogorskiy district (Novoye Serëzhkino village).
- FM 2014a = Samara Region, Chelno-Vershinskiy district (Chuvashskoye Urmet'yevo village).
- FM 2014b = Republic of Tatarstan, Cheremshanskiy district (Novoye Il'movo village).
- FM 2015 = Samara region, Shentalinskiy district (Staroye Afon'kino village).
- FM 2020 = Samara Region, Chelno-Vershinskiy district (Devlezerkino village).
- FM 2021a = Republic of Tatarstan, Cheremshanskiy district (Novoye Il'movo village).
- FM 2021b = Samara region, Shentalinskiy district (Staroye Afon'kino village).
- FM 2021c = Samara Region, Pokhvistnevskiy district (Starogan'kino village).
- FM 2021d = Republic of Tatarstan, Nurlatskiy district (Abryskino, Saldakayevo, Yakushkino villages).
- FM 2021e = Republic of Tatarstan, Aksubayevskiy district (Savgachevo, Urmandeyevo, Sidulovoye Yerykly villages).
- FM 2021f = Samara Region, Chelno-Vershinskiy district (Devlezerkino village).
- FM 2021g = Samara region, Klyavinskiy district (Boriskino-Igar village).
- RSAAA = Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts, Moscow.
- RSAAA, fund 350: case 2454.
- RSDC OMS: Reports of the Samara Diocesan Committee of the Orthodox Missionary Society
- RSDC OMS 1897: Samara Diocesan Gazette 7: 1–43.
- RSDC OMS 1898: Samara Diocesan Gazette 8: 1–53.
- RSDC OMS 1901: Samara Diocesan Gazette 8: 64–67; 9: 79–81.
- RSDC OMS 1903: Samara Diocesan Gazette 8: 1–45.
- RSDC OMS 1904: Samara Diocesan Gazette 9: 1–42.
- RSDC OMS 1909: Samara Diocesan Gazette 11: 1–17.
- SA CSIH = Scientific Archive of the Chuvash State Institute of Humanities.
- SA CSIH, fund I, cases 6, 173, 207; fund III, cases 183, 190, 278.

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