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UDMURT RELIGIOUS PRACTICE TODAY: BETWEEN NATIVE TRADITIONS AND WORLD RELIGIONS*

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ABSTRACT
This article reflects on the complex Udmurt religious situation. The Udmurt, a minority group in Central Russia, have an animistic background and live today in different administrative units of the Russian Federation: they have their own Republic, Udmurtia, in which the majority of the population is composed by ethnic Orthodox Russians, but they live also, from West to East, in the Kirov oblast, in the Mari El Republic, in Tatarstan, in Bashkortostan, and in some smaller groups eastwards. In the core territory they were submitted to forced Evangelisation by the Orthodox Russians after their integration into Muscovy, in the 16th century. Eventually, the imposed conversion succeeded, while in regions where the dominant religion was Islam, and where many fled under pressure, they kept their original religious practice. This article investigates this group's religious affiliations and real practice today, between Orthodoxy and Islam, observing that where Islam dominates, animism thrives while where Orthodoxy dominates, different forms of syncretistic religious practice keep the former worldview alive.

KEYWORDS: Udmurt • Orthodoxy • animism • Islam • syncretism

Often, religious identity is expressed in homogenous terms: one is Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, etc. Often, also, this corresponds to some reality. This paper focuses on the community – more precisely the communities – I have been working on in the last decade. Most of my publications about the Udmurt in the last decade have indeed been focused on the Udmurt ethnic religion, and I have seldom concentrated on generalisations. Let me do so now. Why I have decided to reflect on the overall landscape of this ethnic group is because my decades-long fieldwork among the Udmurt has impressed me on the complicated content of their religious practice, which may effectively be sum-

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marised under the term hybridity (see Anisimov 2022; Leete 2022; Sadikov and Minniyakhmetova 2022 in the Special Issue of *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* 16 (2): *Hybrid Beliefs and Identities*). As soon as we diagnose some phenomenon as hybrid, this leads to in-depth analysis of its constitutive elements. This is what I attempt to do in this article.

On the topic of Udmurt religious practice today, there are different scholarly texts. However, most of them emphasise the statistical dimension: what are the existing religions, how many churches or temples; moreover, these texts are usually centred on the Udmurt Republic, which is the core area of the Udmurt. An Internet site is dedicated to the topic (see *Religiya i vera*), which is apparently a centralised resource concentrating on the religions existing not only in Udmurtia, but more widely in Russia: Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism – which are the religions to which the law confers freedom of practice. It ignores the vernacular[1] religion, called in a generalising term in Russia 'paganism' (*yazychestvo*). Among the official religions, Russian Orthodoxy is dominant: not only is there a category 'Churches', which encompasses 73 churches, but there is also a 'Monasteries' category and an 'Orthodox communities and societies' category, both of which are openly Orthodox; in the 'Religious organisations and communities' category the two organisations enumerated are undoubtedly Christian, and most probably Orthodox. Of the existing Protestant Churches, among which there are definitely Baptists, Lutherans and Pentecostalists, there is only one mention in the general introductory text. But Protestantism under whatever form is not a religion accepted in post-Soviet Russia, no more than it was in the Soviet period. Vladimir Vorontsov and Roman Zvorygin (2021) have dedicated an article to the general religious landscape on this website, promising interesting information. Nevertheless, the referred article is based on polls and statistical information, which may be a starting point, but does not cover essential aspects of our topic. My approach here relies, in addition to existing literature, on other sources: on years long ethnographic observation and qualitative data (FM). I do not claim that this kind of data nullifies statistical figures; however, it puts them in context contributing to a more comprehensive picture of what stands behind the numbers. My aim is to show the diversity and hybridity of the religious scene historically and today.

The importance of religion may, indeed, be evaluated on the basis of polls. We have data from articles written in different years of the post-Soviet period, from 2010 to 2021. The data show that between 1991 and 2006, the number of proclaimed atheists in Russia fell by half, while the number of people considering themselves believers increased from 34% in 1991 to 62% in 2005 (Slobozhnikova 2007: 72). Between 2002 and 2007, Vladimir Vorontsov, Sergey Il'inskij and Yuriy Semënov (2010: 126–127) observed that in Udmurtia religiosity had increased, especially the group of people who did not follow the doctrine of a specific religion, while the non-religious part of the population had diminished by almost 6%, which follows a general pattern. When considering also the subsequent years, the trend is confirmed: the proportion of active believers almost doubled by 2016 (from 8.2% in 2002 up to 16.3%) as well as the percentage of non-active believers, which gains ten points in 14 years (from 42.4% to 52.4%) (Vorontsov and Zvorygin 2021: 151). Later, the questions in the poll changed and a direct comparison became more difficult. However, we can still understand through later polls that Udmurt religiosity, while not comparable to the Tatars', is still higher than the Rus-

sians', at 67.5% for the Tatars, 60.4% for the Udmurt, and 57.4 % for the Russians (ibid.: 152).

While the Udmurt had their own cosmology and religious practice before the 16th century, its functioning was deeply disrupted by Orthodox evangelisation in the 16th to 18th centuries.[2] Later, the Soviet period promoted atheism by all possible means, including coercion. The Soviet institutions taught so-called scientific Marxist thinking; religion was banished from the official social space, and institutions like schools, the army, collective economic units were active promoters of the secular dimension (see for example Luehrmann 2011). Forceful measures were taken against religious practice. Churches were shut down and destroyed and Udmurt traditional sacred places were desecrated: the *keremet* holy groves were dug up, sacred buildings, community *kuala*s, were destroyed. The individual or family *kuala*s were not destroyed as a centralised decision, but they gradually lost their relevance and most of them decayed, or were only used as summer kitchens. In some places the buildings remained, but deprived of their sacral function.[3] Today, generally, they are no more to be seen, with the exception of an Udmurt village in Tatarstan (Varkled-Bodya) where many of them are still in personal yards. In this article I shall examine one after another the different religions present in today's Russia, in the regions inhabited by the Udmurt, thus not only the eponymous republic, but also Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Perm' kray, Kirov oblast, etc.

Some authors understand the religious structure of the Volga region as sharing three religions: vernacular religions (in Russia called 'paganism'), Christianity (Orthodoxy, Old Believers' faith), and Islam; since the end of the 19th century, this structure has not radically changed (Kasimov and Cherniyenko 2015: 199, 200). This remark is relevant, although the three last decades have seen a significant increase in the Orthodox presence in society (ibid.: 200) and a remarkable penetration of Protestant confessions, which are still less significant compared to the vernacular religions' influence. These data however are not precise concerning the part of the vernacular religions, which were not presented in the 1897 census and still are not. It also leaves out all kinds of syncretic phenomena.

A poll in Udmurtia dated 2013 observes that 63.5% of respondents are Russian Orthodox – 74% of them Russian, and 61.5% Udmurt; while 8.5% declare themselves Muslim, and 3.5% Protestant. The role of 'paganism' is minimal 0.5% (Churakova 2014: 152). If we compare this to the situation in 2021, Orthodoxy covers 56.9%, Islam 5.6%, other Christian denominations 1.1% and 'paganism' 1.1% (Vorontsov and Zvorigyn 2021: 154). Another interesting statistic concerns religious organisations: in 2013, in Udmurtia there were 240 Orthodox organisations, which represents 62.5% of respondents; the others were 28.3% Protestant and 7.3% Muslim (Churakova 2014: 150). This reveals not only smaller congregations among Protestants but also a somewhat higher activity level of Protestants, in spite of their quite small percentage in the overall population. This activity level has provoked tension between the Orthodox and the Muslim, who are disturbed by the interference of new, non-traditional actors in the field (ibid.). It is interesting to compare this statistic with earlier and later data: at the end of 1987 there were 36 religious organisations, mainly those of Orthodox and Old Believers. The number of clerics was 35 while in 2009 it was already 157. The number of churches in 1908 was 463 (Berestova 2005: 42), while in 1987 it was 18 and in 2013 the number had reached 152 (Vorontsov et al. 2010: 122). In 2022 there were 340 religious organi-

sations in Udmurtia (among them three monasteries, two central structures and 301 local organisations), among which the Orthodox are 208 and 11 are Old Believers. There are 28 Muslim organisations. The other organisations are probably Protestant and are divided across a fair amount of different denominations (Ponosov 2022).

ORTHODOXY

The criteria allowing to establish how many people practice Orthodoxy in Russia are so fluid, that results range from 2% up to 10% of the population (Slobozhnikova 2007: 71). Scholars think that "the Orthodox religiosity of contemporary Russian citizens is so unsteady and non-structured – from the organisational, dogmatic and ideologic points of view – that any measurement criteria and figures can only be contingent" (Filatov and Lunkin 2005: 44). Before commenting on the present situation, let us look more closely at the historical dimensions of Orthodox penetration.

Orthodoxy as an Output of Evangelisation

The Udmurt could be considered one of the Orthodox peoples of Eastern Europe, as Nadezhda Shutova (2012) notes, and it would be difficult to argue with this assertion. Most Udmurts, taken as a 'whole', and particularly in the territory of today's Udmurtia – which is the administrative unit first formed by the Soviets back in 1920 – consider themselves Orthodox. This is the result of a long missionisation campaign that followed the conquest of the territories inhabited by Udmurts in the 16th century. It started as soon as Kazan fell to the Muscovite armies, in 1552 the first bishops endeavoured to convert animists, easier to tackle than the Muslim Tatars (Werth 2002: 76). This effort was of a sporadic nature at the time. Records have retained the name of St Guria, who was the first bishop and was particularly active in attempting to convert the local non-Christian population as requested by Ivan IV (Nolde 1953: 116–117; Kappeler 1982: 115–120; Bernshtam 1990: 138; Luppov 1999 [1899]: 93–95; Berestova 2005: 103). However, baptisms were few and the overall impact limited. The new turn came at the beginning of the 18th century, when Peter the Great realised that Russia was the last European great power to have 'pagans' on its territory. He launched a resolute campaign to get rid of them. This was expressed through decrees, *ukazy*, prescribing measures against the "pagans". However, as often happened in the Russian empire, these *ukazy* remained on the paper (Abramov 1854: 49; Ogryzko 1941: 25–27; *Istoriya* II 1968: 324; Forsyth 1992: 154; Patrikeyev 1995: 6).

The situation changed in 1740, when the Office for the Affairs of New Converts based in Sviyazhsk was created (Werth 2002: 22). It organised missionary expeditions with a structured team: an archimandrite, two priests, a book-keeper, a secretary, two scribes and three soldiers, with, later, the addition of two teachers, a student and another priest (Luppov 1999 [1899]: 141–145). Finally, the combination of brute force, intimidating word and material encouragements led to the formal goal the Russian state had desired in the Volga area: a huge majority of the native population was baptised and officially became "Christian" (Kappeler 1982: 277; Brennan 1987: 128–129; Luppov 1999 [1899]:

162–163). Furthermore, once on the lists of the Orthodox Church, nobody could backtrack as apostasy was criminalised (Berestova 2005: 96).

There were different drawbacks to this kind of mass baptism. One was the conflicts that arose between newly converted and non-converted peasants, as the tax burden from which the converted were exonerated for three years fell on the non-converted, while the converted were also not willing to relocate (Werth 2002: 23–24). Another drawback was that the baptised were not deeply convinced about the rules that they were due to follow, and therefore the conversions remained formal. As Paul Werth (ibid.) puts it "then they had their own ideas about what Orthodoxy meant for their communities" and "Church officials themselves often disagreed about the kinds of compromises that were appropriate for deepening the attachments of otherwise marginal Christians to Orthodoxy". This does not mean that the new status had no significance. The obligation to follow Orthodox rites over time became a habit and was adapted to everyday life. So indeed, most of the converts started identifying themselves as Orthodox.

At the same time, this did not mean that they understood Orthodoxy as the official Church or that local priests meant it. Under duress, and in the absence of continuous instruction, some basic assumptions of Christianity were systematically ignored, including its exclusionary dimension and the non-tolerance of 'pagan' ways. Furthermore, as Christianity was thoroughly connected to the Russian state, it was seen as the faith of powerful Russians. As a result, it did not replace the old religion, but often worked as an addition to it. Thus, it was not rare to see, in the case of drought, that the Udmurt population prayed in the Orthodox Church and performed blood sacrifices according to vernacular religious practice as well in order to ask for rain (*Otchet* 1913–1914: 7).

At the same time, the tight connection of the Church with the state encouraged the population to perceive the clergy as a particular category of civil servant (Berestova 2005: 48). In 1915, there were 17 missionaries in the Udmurt territory, the majority being Udmurts; apart from this there were three Russians, and some Tatars and Maris (ibid.: 122). Among them, some were more passive and others more active, encouraging missionary initiative and playing a significant role in them. For example, missionary Yosif Stefanov (born 1799) was active in northern Udmurtia, supported violent measures against 'pagans', and destroyed sanctuaries, while at the same time translating religious literature into Udmurt (ibid.: 108). However, he used force and destruction only where the population was subdued enough, for authorities were reluctant to provoke conflict, which only strengthened the non-converts in their resistance (Werth 2002: 118). However, others were more lenient towards Udmurt ceremonies, as with priest Dvinyaninov, who even supported 'pagan' ceremonies and for this reason was dismissed (Berestova 2005: 109); or priest Shubin, who had friendly relations with the Udmurt and never reported them to the police (ibid.).

'Udmurt Orthodoxy'

As we have seen, Orthodoxy was not a free choice by the Volga area's Natives, but it became such within the following decades. With the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, the Church's missionary activities ended on a large scale. Deprived of direct spiritual control and guidance, people reinterpreted Christianity as they were able to, relying on

centuries long understandings according to which each community has its own religious system by right. They felt enabled to pursue their usual rites while adding new ones to them, and this everyday dialogue between religions was permanently renegotiated (see also Werth 2002: 4–5).

Of course, over time the reception of Christianity diversified. Today, some Udmurt families see themselves as fully integrated into Orthodoxy and have interiorised many of its teachings and demands. These are the Udmurt who do not approve of singing during funeral ceremonies, who walk around a coffin clockwise,[4] not following widespread Udmurt traditions. Thus, in my fieldwork experience, are the reactions of famous Udmurt linguist and Orthodox priest Mikhail Atamanov, who commented after watching our film about Udmurt vernacular ceremonies, that the people's behaviour was not "respectful": in a Church ceremony people are silent and concentrated; but there, in an animist ceremony, people talked with one another and even laughed. Indeed, in a vernacular mindset, the border between sacred and profane is not as rigidly drawn. (FM 2019)

By far not all Udmurt Orthodox think in the same way. At the other edge of the spectrum are those who respect the basic Orthodox requirements: they baptise their children, they marry in the Church, they bury their dead in a Christian way; they know when to cross themselves, what prayer formulas to utter. Nevertheless, they do not attend church services regularly and behave according to the rules and celebrations of the vernacular calendar. They make food offerings on a grave and ask protection from their ancestors when they travel far from home. They put out a shot of moonshine to honour the ancestors. In these families, syncretic or hybrid forms of religiosity are prevalent. And yet these Udmurts acknowledge themselves as Orthodox. It is a rather heterodox understanding of Orthodoxy, but historically, the Orthodox Church has left space for it and in general does not fight such instances of hybrid practice.

This has been the way many Udmurts related to Orthodoxy during the Soviet period. In the post-Soviet period, the Orthodox Church started occupying a more relevant position. The post-Soviet revival started quickly in Udmurtia, for the diocese was restored in 1989 with Bishop Palladi (Shiman) (Filatov and Shchipkov 1997: 178), but it was only after 1993, with energetic Bishop Nikolay (Shrumko), that Orthodox activities started to flourish (ibid.: 179). Furthermore, Orthodoxy among the Udmurt has been powerfully promoted by some influential Udmurt intellectuals. For instance, it is impossible to overestimate Mikhail Atamanov's role here. Atamanov was an already well-known linguist when he became an activist in the religious field. He is the first and main Udmurt promoter of Russian Orthodoxy as a priest. His route has not been easy. Some bishops refused to recognise Udmurt as a liturgical language, and refused communion to churchgoers who had confessed in Udmurt (Atamanov 1999: 62–70). Especially aggressive was Antoniy (Aleksey Malykh), a bishop in northern Udmurtia, who even burnt Udmurt-language Bibles (ibid.: 92), and encouraged others to burn such "Satanic" productions (ibid.: 66–68).

Nevertheless, there is one small church in Izhevsk (the capital of Udmurtia, Izhkar in Udmurt), with an Udmurt liturgy. It is attended by elderly women and highly educated scholars. However, apart from the abovementioned conflict, it has not been easy to integrate Udmurts into the official Orthodox Church, led by the Moscow Patriarchate: while about 30 priests are of Udmurt descent (although not all are fluent in the

language, see Vallikivi 2018) and some Udmurt intellectuals and activists have indeed joined the Orthodox Church – choir singers are mainly PhDs in ethnomusicology or folkloristics – many remain unattached and have clear sympathy for the vernacular Udmurt religion (see Filatov and Shchipkov 1997: 178–179). Thus, Shutova (2012) is correct in saying that the Udmurt are one of the Orthodox peoples of Eastern Europe, although the understanding of what "being Orthodox" means can be discussed. Statistically, while the most active followers of their religion are Tatars from Udmurtia (45%), the Udmurt seem not to be too different (37.8%). But these figures reflect more complicated realities: while one fifth of the Tatars (21.2%) follow the rites, only 9.9 % of the Udmurt do so (Vorontsov and Semënov 2011: 273.)

But for the Udmurt, how much does Orthodoxy represent an ethnic marker (as Islam is for the Tatars)? Yekaterina Churakova (2010: 296) observes that the vernacular religion had lost most of its relevance during the Soviet period, and by the beginning of the 1990s the Udmurt were "in a vacuum" as Orthodoxy was not part of ethnic identification and their ancestral religion had lost much of its relevance. The place of religion among the ethnic markers, according to recent research, is mainly relevant for Tatars, for 35% of whom Islam is relevant to their ethnicity. It is important also for 13.8% of Russians and for only 7.8% of the Udmurt (Vorontsov and Zvorygin 2021: 155).

We should not omit an important strand in the varied landscape of Orthodoxy, which is the Old Believers. There are 'schismatic' Old Believers in Udmurt territory and they are considered a 'traditional confession'. Today, there are 16 Old Believers' organisations, and two churches as well as three prayer houses, while two priests officiate in these communities. Old Believers' communities are independent and they do not rely on state support (Vorontsov et al. 2010: 122–123). Most of Udmurtia's Old Believers dwell in the northern parts of Udmurtia. In 2018, I attended an Old Believers' festival in the north of Udmurtia: regretfully, the Old Believer dimension was downplayed while the festival appeared to be an initiative of promotion of Russian values and way of life (FM 2018).

ISLAM

Islam is one of the officially acknowledged religions in Udmurtia and also present in the wider areas where several Udmurt diasporas live in Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. It is one of the 'traditional religions': in the mid-19th century, there were in Udmurtia 116 mosques, and at the end of the century there were almost 140 of them, with separate schools for boys and for girls nearby (Berestova 2005: 118). It was also a powerful protection of the communities against external influences, as Islam is dogmatically strong and gives a solid ideological foundation to keep its own rules and culture (ibid.: 296).

Statistically it is the second religion after Orthodoxy, and shows remarkable stability in the last decades (Slobozhnikova 2007: 72). In Udmurtia this is not a religion of ethnic Udmurts, but that of Tatars and Bashkirs (Berestova 2005: 115), who are Sunnis (Vorontsov et al. 2010: 122). Muslims now have 26 organisations, with 19 being registered by the state and 18 being local (ibid.: 122). In Izhevsk there are three mosques, and representatives of the regional spiritual direction of Udmurt Muslims has permanent dia-

logue with the state as they take part in several forums. The field of Islam information is also taken over by ethnic organisations, which are not explicitly Muslim but defend the rights of the Uzbeks, Chechens, Azerbaijani and Tajiks in Udmurtia (Kasimov and Pozdeyev 2017: 69).

Actually, Islam shares with Orthodoxy in Russia a double characteristic: firstly, it is an official religion; and secondly it also functions as a strong ethnic marker, mainly for Tatars but also for Bashkir. No other officially registered religion shares these two characteristics. This means that conversion to Islam also implies a change in the ethnic perception of the self, and for a long time, it was not possible to become a Muslim and remain Udmurt. What is the situation today? I have no example of such conversion, but I wonder whether the perception has changed… At least in the past, such a conversion inevitably led the converts to become Tatar. While Orthodoxy is vernacularly called the Russian faith (*dzh'uch' oskon*), Islam is indeed called the Tatar faith (*biger oskon*). Take the case of the Eastern Udmurt: in some Tatar villages in Bashkortostan, people remember that they were Udmurts, although today the Udmurt language has been forgotten and they identify totally with the Tatar, as in Garibashevo (Sadikov 2019). This happened at the end of the 19th century, despite conversion to Islam being prohibited by a state directive (Werth 2002: 198).

Islam in Udmurtia is undergoing deep transformations, the most important of which is its increased influence due to immigration from other Russian regions and from abroad. In spite of the declared Muslim unity, understandings of the religious field between different regions and countries is significantly varied (Kasimov and Pozdeyev 2017: 69). The most recent influx of Muslim people comes from the post-Soviet states of the Caucasus and Central Asia: while in 2011 the incoming Muslim population was 969, in 2014 it was already 1,605 and in 2016, more than 2,000. Therefore, as the head of the Central Mosque of Udmurtia declared, while formerly he could use Tatar in contacts with believers, now he must switch to Russian (ibid.: 70). As some argue, Muslim identity separates believers from the chaotic world beyond the borders set by a whole series of prohibitions and rules (Kardinskaya 2009: 78–79).

This causes strain between Muslim believers as those from Azerbaijan are mainly Shiites, while those from Dagestan and Chechnya have their own practices, which must be taken into account (Kasimov and Pozdeyev 2017: 70–71). Another potential source of conflict is the presence of students from the Arabic countries of the Middle East whose practice of Islam is much more severe than in the former Soviet states (Plyushchenko et al. 2019: 112). They are also active in propagating more extreme forms of Islam, provoking hostile reactions from the population (ibid.). I have occasionally witnessed this hostility through the comments of university dormitory managers and of taxi drivers in Izhevsk (FM 2019; 2020; see also Châtelet 2023).

PROTESTANTISM

Laur Vallikivi (2019) has devoted a substantial article to the Eastern protestant mission. However, his focus is different: he aims to show how the Finno-Ugric kinship myth has fed the Eastern mission among Finns and Estonians. Nevertheless, it gives many illuminating insights I rely on, while also using other sources. Other authors have followed

the development of Russia's Protestantism in the last decades, especially Aleksandr Klyashev. I rely also on his observations.

Protestantism is not among the traditional religions of Russia that are recognised as legitimate. Still its penetration is not a recent phenomenon. It had been paradoxically facilitated by the state, when Peter the Great, at the beginning of the 18th century, invited German specialists and scholars to develop Russia's army and sciences (Marshall 1966: 56; Kappeler 1994: 128). The penetration of Protestantism within the local Russian population started only during the 19th century with different denominations, Lutherans, Baptists, Pentecostalists. For example, at the Izhevsk plant, a Lutheran church was built in 1872 with state funding (Berestova 2005: 115).

In Russia, the only territorial minority for whom Protestantism is traditional are the Ingrian Finns. Their ethnic identity is connected to Lutheranism, unlike very close groups of Baltic Finns such as the Izhorians and Karelians, who are Orthodox. Ingrians have created their own Lutheran Church, the Ingrian Church, the members of which are, at the beginning of the 21st century, mainly ethnic Russians, who are more numerous within the Church, more so than the Finns (34,000) and the Estonians (28,000) (Filatov and Lunkin 2005), showing how widely and deeply this confession has spread.

The Protestants were persecuted during the Soviet period, with their influence mainly growing after the collapse of the Soviet Union, in the spiritual void that led to a revitalisation of the religious market. Russian State propaganda has always labelled the Protestant confessions as foreign, carefully denying the autochthonous dimensions of Russian Protestantism. Their main activities are assigned to foreign organisations: "in order to support the new communities, the foreign centres organised festivity shows, seminars, conferences, created local Protestant media, propagated their ideology through commercial TVs and homepages on social media" (Vorontsov et al. 2010: 125). As with all identities, the Orthodox identity creates borders and oppositions, and the existence of the Protestants is an excellent tool to mark boundaries (Vallikivi 2018: 152). While indeed since 1990 there has been a period when international missions were active – from Finland, Estonia, the US – it has been easy to ignore the fact that actually most Protestant missionaries originate from Russia itself. It has also been easy to forget that some autochthonous peoples in Russia, such as the Ingrian Finns, have Lutheranism as their original religion, giving it a rooted basis within Russia itself. The Russian Orthodox Church sees Protestantism as a threat, as competitors, and although they try not to react publicly, they cannot avoid giving rise to polemic discussions (at least in the pre-war period). Everywhere where they develop, they 'hunt' on ROC territory, so that scholars must even notice when Protestant attempts to put down roots fails, as in Alnashi district (Churakova 2010: 298).

It has been argued that Protestants are "dangerous foreigners" who threaten Russian identity and the state's power (Vorontsov et al. 2010: 125). The same authors assert that at an interregional conference in Izhevsk in 1995, Protestants had decided to conquer the Volga-Urals region and start "aggressive missionary activity" (ibid.). Alexander Agadjanian (2014: 40) comments:

> According to a dominant interpretation, all people living on this particular "canonical territory" and belonging to this particular ethnos (for example, Russians) are endemically Christian Orthodox, independently of their religious beliefs and practice or the absence thereof (which is largely the case in most postcommunist socie-

ties). Therefore, proselytism is seen as creating a threat not only to the dominant Church but also to the whole ethnonational community.

This is interesting when considering that Protestants represent only about 2% of Russia's population (Filatov 2016: 261) and yet are given that much attention. A local law was issued as an answer, in order to "regulate" the religious process (Vorontsov et al. 2010: 125). After 2007, however, the growth of Protestant organisations was contained, partly because of internal contradictions (ibid.: 126), and in this way the activities of foreign missionaries have been more or less efficiently limited by law (e.g. Yarovaya).

Everywhere, at the beginning of the century, Protestantism has grown with an impressive speed. According to official information, in 1990 there were 15 organisations, nine of them with legal status in Udmurtia. Between 1991 and 2009 the number of organisations had grown to 69 (Vorontsov et al. 2010: 122). In 2020 there were 61 Protestant organisations representing different denominations: 26 Pentecostal, 21 Evangelical, seven Adventist, three Baptist, three Lutheran and one Neo-Apostolic (Vorontsov and Zvorygin 2021: 150). Russian Protestantism is accustomed to adapting to local peculiarities (Klyashev 2010: 140). This is actually one of the secrets of its success: while building a super-ethnic community, it relates to the ethnicities of their flock and thus in Bashkortostan there are activities in Tatar and Bashkir for such members of the Protestant communities (ibid.: 142).

One of the basic conditions for Protestantism to develop is the existence of the Bible in vernacular languages. Indeed, this is the case for the Udmurt (as well as for the Komi), for since 2013 the whole Bible has been available in Udmurt in Atamanov's translation.

In Udmurtia, Protestantism is not indeed a religion with local roots, it has come from outside, although not necessarily from outside Russia. The Ingrian Lutheran Church has been present (Vallikivi 2018), as well as the only Protestant community listed on a state site, the Philadelphia Church, a Pentecostalist community whose members and even one pastor, Valeriy Pikulin, are ethnic Udmurts (Bourdeaux and Filatov 2005: 333). The Philadelphia Church admittedly has an Udmurt folk group called *Inkrez'*[5] (Vorontsov and Cherniyenko 2015: 165) and around 50 Udmurts (Nelson 2009: 6). Other Charismatic Churches exist as well. Lutherans have been promoted by Finnish missionaries and are the best-accepted Protestant community: for instance, they are not called sects as the charismatic groups usually are in Russia. Thus, research done in Bashkortostan reveals that several Orthodox priests use depreciative qualifications towards Pentecostalists – "between drug addicts and sectants there is no difference", for example (Mukhametzyanova-Duggal and Klyashev 2010: 778). Unlike within the Mari community, the Ingrian Church has not been particularly successful among the town Udmurt intelligentsia. The Izhevsk parish was long led by a German pastor, Garald Vogau (1923–2007). Curiously, there is one Lutheran community in the countryside in the Vavozh district, in the small town of Gurezh Pudga. While one of the Protestant assets has usually been the use of the vernacular language (in contrast to the use of a scholarly sacred language, distant from the vernacular), in Udmurtia this has been downplayed. Indeed, the community founders were not Udmurt and were not fluent in Udmurt. More so, Gurezh Pudga's present pastor is ethnically a Tatar, so the functioning language of the community is indeed Russian, while parishioners speak Udmurt with one another (FM 2018). Paradoxically, the promotion the ethnic language has come more powerfully through Orthodoxy, which now provides a religious life mostly in

Udmurt in one church in the capital. While the Helsinki Society for Bible translation is rooted in Protestant doctrines, it has mainly organised the full translation of both Testaments into Udmurt through the Orthodox Church by assisting Atamanov throughout the long translation process. There is another group of Protestants, who started developing the use of vernacular language, that has recently joined the Orthodox Church as well (Shushakova and Boldyreva 2021).

The Protestants have been particularly successful on the social level as they are the first to develop work among drug (Churakova 2014: 151) or alcohol addicts, the victims as well as their kin. In other cases, the Protestant organisations take care of elderly people's houses, rehabilitation, or orphanages, offering necessary finances (Mukhametzyanova-Duggal and Klyashev 2010: 779). There is one interesting difference that Klyashev (2017) notes: the Protestants among Russians are more educated than the average population, while the Finno-Ugric Protestants are more traditional than the others.

THE VERNACULAR RELIGION[6]

Why dedicate a section in this article to vernacular religion, and why mention it in last position? Perhaps assuming that the last mentioned is the most important.

The Udmurt Vernacular Religion

For the Udmurt, it is relevant. Before the arrival of Christianity, historical sources inform us that the Udmurt had their own religious practices. Researchers such as Peter Simon Pallas, Thorsten Aminoff, Axel Heikel, Bernát Munkácsi, Yrjö Wichmann, to mention just a few scholars from the 18th and 19th centuries (Sadikov and Minniyakhmetova 2012), have written reports on the traditional religion of the Udmurt. They saw their environment as animated, full of spirits who were responsible for their own particular domains; some of the spirits began to act as more general and powerful deities shaping human lives.[7] We have sources informing us of the existence of a 'supreme god' called Inmar, a *deus otiosus*. There were also a fertility god, closer to humans and connected with creation, Kyldysin, and a god of the weather, Kuaz', the most widely known deities, with some regional differences (Kuaz', known in Northern Udmurtia, does not exist for the Eastern Udmurt). In addition, some great 'mothers' have been mentioned: Mother Sun (or mother of the Sun), Shundy Mumy; the mother of the moon, Tolez' Mumy; the mother of the thunder, Gudyry Mumy; and some other deities, like the deity of the Earth, Mu Kylchin (see Khrushcheva 1995: 196; Vinogradov 2010: 12; Lintrop 2003: 70).

However, these sources reflect a situation after a period of mass conversions. They are mainly from the 19th century, suggesting that this vernacular system could have been a result of hybrid phenomena. As Finnish scholar Holmberg (Harva) emphasised, there were reciprocal influences, and while I have underlined the importance of syncretism in Udmurt Orthodoxy, we cannot ignore the influence of Christianity, or indeed, other forms of monotheism, on traditional Udmurt religious practice (Holmberg 1915: 10; see also Vladykin and Khristolyubova 1997: 112; Lintrop 2003: 180–186). Was the

idea of a supreme god inherent to the early Udmurt religious system, or has it developed under the influence of this notion, which is central to Christian monotheism, as well as to neighbouring Islam; or do they reflect earlier Iranian and Turkic influences? We have no means to ascertain this with full certainty.

What we know is that after the conversion campaign of the 18th century, animist ceremonies were not totally discontinued, and even some huge gatherings were held, not only by the Udmurt. We have some fascinating reports by Yrjö Wichmann (Sadikov and Mäkelä 2008) as well as by the Mari (Werth 2002: 56–58; Lallukka and Popov 2009). What is, however, certain is that both the 19th century missionaries and today's Christians have chosen not to invent a special word for the Christian God, but use the same word as that one designating the Udmurt supreme god, Inmar, thus encouraging the hybrid approach to religion. This allows, among other things, continuity to be established between the worship of the old and today's Christian faith, as Izhevsk's Udmurt Orthodox priest Pavel Grigor'yev argues (see below). One of the main features of the animistic beliefs is that, unlike the monotheistic religions, they are not exclusive (Werth 2002: 30). This is the main reason for the deep misunderstanding between Orthodox activists and Native communities. As one of the principal Orthodox priests, Father Pavel Grigor'yev, who officiates in the Izhevsk Church in Udmurt, states: "I don't see in the vernacular practice anything opposed to the Christian faith. I may attend ceremonies. They are our past and we must respect it. They are part of us." (FM 2018) This acceptance without a shade of conflict also explains how syncretism can be widespread and accepted in Udmurt society. While Werth (2002: 30), noting a "kind of religious schizophrenia", comments "it is not clear that baptised animists were themselves plagued by a sense of cognitive dissonance", I am sure, from my own fieldwork experience, that none is, even today. It is a dissonance primarily from a Russian Christian point of view, not necessarily from an Udmurt one.

The Vernacular Religion Today in Udmurtia

Indeed, and this is the reason why I talk about vernacular religion and not about neopaganism, vernacular religion has somehow survived and evolved into a separate phenomenon. The 18th-century conversion campaigns did not achieve one of their acknowledged goals, i.e. the total uprooting of former religious practices. Indeed, the first wave of evangelisation was not concerned with how the newly converted people thought. Even later, after 1767,[8] when conversion could no longer be imposed on reluctant people, missionaries were more concerned with following the rules than with conceptual matters. Thus, the people never understood the exclusivism, which is at the core of the Christian faith: while it is obvious within Christian dogmatics that it excludes other kinds of conceptual thinking, this obviousness is not self-evident for people who are accustomed to the fact that each people has its own understandings and that they are not universal. Based on my fieldwork, I suggest that this is how animistic people think: that's why they talk about the Russian faith and the Tatar faith and the Udmurt faith: each one has its own, legitimate, religion, it is not less valuable than the Udmurt one, it is just different. Thus, there is no incompatibility between the Udmurt 'faith' and the Russian 'faith'. Practising Russian rituals provides the Udmurt an additional pro-

tection from a powerful God – the Russian God must be powerful indeed, for the Russians have achieved such a wide domination. The Udmurt have added a layer to their religious practice. This is something that Christian missionaries never fully understood: for them, the exclusivity of their religion is a basic quality so obvious that is does not deserve further explication, and they assumed that all religions are similarly exclusivist (such as, for example, Islam).

However, under the pressure of Orthodoxy and later Soviet atheism, in Udmurtia vernacular religious practice as such has indeed faded. The percentage of followers of traditional beliefs is often understated: according to Churakova (2014: 152), it is 0.5%; more recent statistics mention 1.1% (Vorontsov and Zvorigyn 2021: 154). In 2016, Sergey Maksimov (2016: 31) mentions the much higher figure of 7%, while other percentages are to be found in other sources: 4% of the population, both urban, and rural, in 2004, while the same source observes that according to Atamanov, it was 6.5%, i.e. 50,000 people (Il'inskiy 2002–2004). What may we infer from these different estimations? First of all, that the Udmurt vernacular religion has not totally disappeared. It has its followers. Secondly, the figures are not stable. This might refer also to a certain fluidity in the community concerned, allowing respondents to the polls to give different positions depending on circumstances. There are no 'congregations' which it would be comfortable to count as a flock.

A very tiny part of the Udmurt population has not been baptised. One village is always given as an example, Kuzebayevo in Alnashi district, for being a resisting stronghold of Udmurt rituals. There, the population has never been missionised on a large scale. Today some individuals have been baptised, but these are individual initiatives and did not disrupt traditional religious practice, with communal rituals that take place at least twice a year (FM 2018). In this village, the population has been divided into three clans, each of which has its sacrificial priests and its forms of worship: the Great Kuala, Keremet and Bulda clans (Shutova 2013: 364–365; Atamanov 2014: 29). These events were totally separated in the past: members of one were not supposed to attend the ceremonies of the others. Today, the separation is not as absolute and for example everyone attends the Great Kuala ceremonies on June 13. Kuzebayevo is also the only village in Udmurtia where the village *kuala* has been preserved, in spite of Soviet attempts to destroy it (Siikala 2004: 148). The sacrificial priests are still different for each clan, and they rotate; they are periodically elected. They do not utter their prayers out loud. Unlike Eastern Udmurt practice, they say them silently and bow in the right places, while the community, in the ceremonies, imitates their gestures. Private rituals have subsided although some are still performed in families, with or without the assistance of sacrificial priests (FM 2018).

However, in 'Orthodox villages', i.e. in villages in which the whole population has been baptised, the syncretic approach also explains the fact that Udmurt ritual life has maintained many of its traditional features. Holidays have merged and live today with a hybrid nature, both Christian and traditional, with features of both. Thus, one of the Udmurt central celebrations was the complex Spring celebrations, called the Great Day *Bydzh'ynnal* (a shortened version of *Bydzh'yn nunal*, 'the Great Day'). Today, these celebrations have merged with Christian Easter, one of the names for which in Russian is 'the great day' (one of the Udmurt denominations is *Veliktem*, a loanword from Russian) (see Maksimov 2016). For example, the celebration day coincides with the Orthodox

Easter. However, there are other aspects of the celebration of this day the origin of which is not connected with Orthodoxy, but are reminiscent of the fertility celebrations of the plough holiday (*akashka*, *akayashka*). The Udmurt do also have rituals for their ancestors, as the Orthodox do, but they perform them in their own way. They also have particular celebrations, some features of which are not accepted by Orthodox priests, such as the practice of food crumbling (*kuyashkon*), which is very actively condemned by the Church (Verkhnyaya Yum'ya, FM 2017).[9] Some particular celebrations are deeply rooted in Udmurt traditions, such as *Yyr-pyd-s'oton* ('the giving of the head and legs' of an animal), the final commemoration of a dead parent.

These Udmurt traditions are particularly alive in the southern part of the country: the Southern Udmurt have been under Tatar cultural influence longer than others, and this has allowed them to keep more elements of their own culture alive than in the Russian Orthodox environment. Thus, in Karamas-Pel'ga (Kiyasovo district), the local Udmurt activists have lately revitalised several vernacular celebrations, such as *Akashka* and *Shyd s'ion.* Indeed, not everyone is happy about the touristic dimension of these celebrations, but there is an attempt to bring to life traditions that were formerly kept alive in secret (FM 2018).

In other southern Udmurt regions, such as the Malaya Purga district, revitalisation has been particularly intense in the last three or four years. Bagrash Bigra village has its own sacrificial priest who is now openly performing the now dwindling ceremonies that were previously clandestine or practiced privately For example, village ceremonies, honouring the dead and ceremonies dedicated to village clans (FM 2019) have been organised in recent years (Kornilov 2021).

What I have been commenting upon is vernacular religion for me, because there is continuity between some practice that has always been kept in particular villages and what is happening today. However, there have also been attempts to revitalise traditional religion in the capital, Izhevsk. In this case, I am not sure whether it is not an example at Udmurt neo-paganism. Izhevsk was not initially an Udmurt centre, it was built as a Russian industrial centre. Udmurts soon worked in the metal factory, but if there was Udmurt traditional practice there it has long been lost. So, in Izhevsk there was not much to revitalise, although Izhevsk is the capital of Udmurtia and most of Udmurtia's intellectuals live here. When the diverse religious market was opened after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Udmurt activists endeavoured to guarantee the presence and thriving of Udmurt traditional ceremonies. They invited sacrificial priests from the areas where they had never discontinued their prectice, for example from northern Bashkortostan (Nazip Sadriyev; FM 2013). They revitalised ceremonies in the capital and some well-known activists and intellectuals participated actively in these actions.

In this context, I must mention philosopher Al'bert Razin, who would become famous worldwide in 2021 for his self-immolation; other scholars, such as linguist Rif Nasibullin, poet Fëdor Pukrokovich Pukrokov, architect Kasim Galikhanov and other founders were either Udmurt ethnic activists, as Lidiya Orekhova was, or entrepreneurs, as Vladislav Yakupov is. Some of them, such as Galikhanov, Pukrokov and Nasibullin, were born in Bashkortostan, where this vernacular practice is fully alive, so they had personal experience of it (Il'inskiy 2002–2004). In the first years of the 1990s, their ideas, encouraged by recognition in Mari El of the 'traditional religion' (*Mariyskaya*

tradicionnaya religiya) as one of the official religions, alongside Orthodoxy, inspired the national movement, although *Udmurt vös'* suffered some defeats. For example, they had planned a space within the capital Izhevsk dedicated to the Udmurt vernacular religion, with a building planned by Galikhanov, which would have been called the Centre for Udmurt Spiritual Culture (*Tsentr dukhovnoy kul'utury udmurtov*) (Il'inskiy 2002–2004). Ultimately, the authorities refused permission (FM 2019; Il'inskiy 2002–2004) and the organisation was liquidated in 2008 (Vorontsov et al. 2010: 124).

The Vernacular Religion in the Diasporas

Indeed, it is in the diasporas that the vernacular religion is very much alive. The main reason, as suggested above, is connected to the historical background and the social environment: in Tatarstan and in Bashkortostan, the dominant religion of the dominant ethnic group is Islam, which has been much less intrusive than Orthodoxy. While, as mentioned above, some villages have converted to the 'Tatar faith' and have become Tatars, most of them have kept the Udmurt worldview which, according to them, had been the main inducement to migration.

Migration towards the East started in the 16th century, alongside with the occupation of former Udmurt lands by the Russian. Many peasants just fled across the Kama river and settled in Bashkir lands (Sadikov 2001: 17; Werth 2002: 18, 23), where the "state's control had always been rather tenuous" (Werth 2002: 78). According to the explanations that have been transmitted through the generations, Udmurt peasants who did not want to renounce their traditional way of live and of thinking migrated, often by entire villages, to the neighbouring (or less neighbouring) Islamic regions. Sometimes indeed only some kilometres were needed to have them protected from the intrusion of the Russian world, with the Tatar environment helping them remain themselves and retain their practices. Thus, the distance between Kuzebayevo (Alnashi district, Udmurtia) and Varkled-Bodya (Agryz district, Tatarstan) is not big, a few dozen kilometres, but this new village has maintained lots of Udmurt traditions that have disappeared in Udmurtia proper. Some villages fled further away, to the eastern steppes where the Bashkir lived. Here they settled, rented then bought land and pursued their lives as they desired, forming the Eastern Udmurt diaspora. (See Toulouze and Anisimov 2020a.)

There were no serious obstacles to maintaining their previous traditions. The 'Tatar shield' functioned properly: Christian missionaries were not allowed into Muslim territory, to the extent that Hungarian scholar Bernát Munkácsy was suspected of being a missionary and was not allowed to reach the Udmurt (Sadikov and Minniyakhmetova 2012: 52) and so Udmurt villages continued their rituals. Christianity has been barely visible in these lands. In some districts there were even no churches at all until recent years: when our research group arrived to do ethnographic fieldwork in 2013, there was no church building in Tatyshly district, while in 2018 a church was built, apparently using collected funds (collection boxes were put in all the village shops), although most of the money came from the Church's own means (FM 2019). Although in general religious practice has been preserved better than in the core regions, the vernacular ritual cycles were still in some ways disrupted by the Soviet regime. This disruption was less intrusive than elsewhere as here the local Communists were either Tatars of Bashkirs

and were more favourable towards Udmurt rituals than the Russians. Numerous testimonies confirm that kolkhoz leaders often offered sacrificing animals for the Udmurt ceremonies because their efficiency was well proven: "When the Udmurt pray, it rains". Nevertheless, here it also happened that Party leaders disrupted ceremonies, knocking over porridge cauldrons to dissuade people from holding these ceremonies (Toulouze and Vallikivi 2021).

The response to these communist aggressions was as diverse as sacrificial priests were diverse. Some of them, the most obstinate, endeavoured to continue their ceremonies. Thus, today there are places in Bashkortostan where ceremonies have never been discontinued, in spite of Communist Party's discontent. In other places sacrificial priests either died without anybody to take over or were intimidated and ceased to organise the ceremonies (Toulouze and Niglas 2021).

There is much we do not know in detail from the Soviet period; indeed, studying religion was not more favoured than practicing it, so not many scholars followed the situation in Udmurt villages, instead they studied other aspects of Udmurt life. In many villages we only know that, at some moments, ceremonies were discontinued. This happened at different moments, often due to local issues and initiatives. Often the perception of chronology by the informants is at least imprecise. We know for example, because of Finnish researchers in the 19th century, about ceremonies in Bol'shekachakovo in 1895 (Sadikov and Hafeez 2010). But the following fieldwork data are only from 2008, when Finnish student Kirsi Mäkelä-Hafeez spent three months in the field attempting to understand what had happened in between (Hafeez 2015). Then, some elder people still remembered ceremonies they had attended with their grandmothers, or they recalled the coins they found lying on grounds that had been sacred places. After the 1990s, and more probably at the beginning of the 21st century, an initiative mainly from above led to the revitalisation of the communal ritual in the village. A sacrificial priest was appointed and now ceremonies are being held regularly (Toulouze 2020). This situation illustrates a very diversified religious landscape: neighbouring villages may have an uninterrupted ceremonial history, or have a very late revitalisation. This also has consequences on the content of the ritual with older forms having more prayers and newer being strongly simplified.

General Features

What characterises this kind of religious practice is its non-normativity, of course within certain limits. It is a decentralised and non-dogmatic practice.

This practice relies on tradition,[10] tradition being definitely localised and varied. The validity of many of its norms is limited to a certain space: a village, a group of villages, a district. For example, propitiatory sacrifices are carried out by slaughtering a ewe. This sentence is valid for the Tatyshly and the Burayevo districts where the ewe must be fertile and have given birth at least once. But in Yanaul district villages, the sacrificial animal must be a ram the blood of which has never been shed, i.e. not a castrated animal. In the Kaltasy district no attention is paid to the animal's sex, both are acceptable. The motivation for the rule is often frail: no dogma has been constructed to explain it, it is the way things are; this is what the elders did, and what our ancestors did. No par-

ticular narratives have been invented, probably because none of the sacrificial priests have ever been confronted with the need to justify these practices, but any attempt to generalise the rule is meant to be a failure. I have witnessed how, at the *Elen vös'* general ceremony (FM 2019), the Altayevo sacrificial priest, instructing his colleagues, had prescribed taking a ewe as the sacrificial animal. The Yanaul district priests listen to the reproach, and go on acting as they always have, in exactly the way most Udmurts react when the Orthodox priest remonstrates with them.

Not only are there no common institutions, but there are also no common words. The prayers are uttered by the sacrificial priest according to the prayer (in Udmurt *kuris'kon*) his predecessors have taught him. This general rule is also changing, with the arrival of new post-Soviet generations of sacrificial priests. They rely more on the written word, either on texts published in the press, or written by their predecessors or by other priests. The idea of imitating the world religions in standardising proceedings has been expressed by some Udmurt official personalities, but has found no resonance in the understanding of those concerned[11] (FM 2014; Toulouze and Vallikivi 2021).

SOME LOCAL PECULIARITIES

I shall concentrate firstly on the village recognised as the "Mecca for Udmurt scholars" (Sadikov 2017: 101), Varkled-Bodya in Tatarstan. Here, as with most other followers of Udmurt traditions, many rituals ignored elsewhere have been retained. Of course – and this is a general rule – to say that does not mean that the rituals have been transmitted unchanged in any way. All are subject to natural evolution and change over time. So, when exploring today's proceedings in-depth, we discovered many changes in progress. For example, with initiation rites, a peculiarity existing at the moment only in Varkled-Bodya: on the week before Orthodox Easter (see above), the village boys who are 16–17 years old engage in an initiation ritual on Thursday, and the girls in a parallel one on Sunday, after which the young people are seen as adults in the village community, and are apt to fulfil any function in rituals as well as to marry (Toulouze and Anisimov 2020b). Today the proceedings are fixed, as well as the days. But conversations with the locals reveal (FM 2017) that the present situation is the result of evolution, change and negotiation: firstly, the boys' initiation proceedings were earlier much more connected with another ritual that takes place on the same day, the chasing of evil spirits, the two having almost merged, while today they are clearly distinct. The girls' initiation was originally not on Sunday but on Monday. When the school teachers protested that the girls did not attend school that day, it was moved to Sunday. However, this means it clashes with another ritual that was supposed to mobilise all of the population on Sunday, a kinship rite, *vös' nerge*, that implies smaller kinship groups, or *bölyak*s, should visit all the households within the group, praying and singing together. So today the two rituals take place on the same day, with the visits for *vös' nerge* interrupted once in the afternoon so that the population can gather at the girl's initiation and proceeding again at the end of the girls' ritual. This ritual, actually, originally called *nyl kuras'kon* 'the quest of the girls', is not precisely, but increasingly, today called *Akashka*, the feast of the plough, although now in Varkled Bodya its meaning has changed and covers the girls' initiation ritual.

On other levels, central elements of Udmurt practice are retained in Varkled Bod'ya. For example, as mentioned above many households retain the *kuala*. They may not be used as sacred buildings, but awareness of them exists and they are treated with respect: they are reconstructed when they start rotting and the original planks are carefully stored and kept. So much so that a younger sacrificial priest from the village Oleg Mikhaylov has started cleaning his *kuala* to restore it to the status of family sanctuary (FM 2023).

An interesting feature that distinguishes the Eastern Udmurt proceedings is that there, unlike in Udmurtia, the sacrificial priests utter the prayers out loud. Probably in Udmurtia the practice of uttering prayers aloud was lost in the hostile Soviet period. Here, a good sacrificial priest is someone who has a strong and clear voice, so that everyone can hear what he says to the deities; new sacrificial priests are chosen on this basis as well. This means that while we do not know – in Udmurtia as well as in Tatarstan – what the priests are saying to God, in Bashkortostan we have recorded prayers in different places, and others had collected them before us, so that we have a serious corpus of Eastern Udmurt prayers. This allows reflection in depth on how the Udmurt address their gods, on their understanding of the pantheon, and on the ongoing changes.

Indeed, the Eastern Udmurt sacrificial priests have been thinking long on the need and possibility to change the canonical texts, i.e. the texts inherited or received from previous sacrificial priests. The collection of prayers we have gathered, starting from the very beginning of research on Udmurt religion, allows us to observe that changes have been introduced all along: while in the tsarist period people asked for enough money to pay taxes to the tsar and prayed for his health, in the Soviet period the discourse was adapted to realities, and people asked for health for the kolkhoz cattle and for the head of the kolkhoz. These were adaptations imposed by the period, meaning that the reality in which the prayers took place had changed. (Toulouze and Vladykina forthcoming)

Today the changes are perhaps less drastic and come more from the inner sensitivity of sacrificial priests than from any social obligation. But while one creative priest writes his prayers himself, others in other villages, having heard his prayers, decided to change their basic prayer in order to have it fit better the realities of our time (FM 2019). The realities that have changed are clearly of a technological nature: now they ask for vehicles to transport the hay to the threshing floor rather than horses. There have also been changes in the villagers' lives: some of their children attend university, move to towns and become russified to some extent, as they no longer follow Udmurt traditional rules. The new requests match the needs to be protected against the modern world's dangers and alienation. Thus, the idea of Udmurtness has for the first time penetrated Udmurt prayers (see Sadikov and Toulouze 2023).

CONCLUSION: RELATIONS BETWEEN RELIGIONS

In these regions far from the Russian Orthodoxy stronghold the vernacular Udmurt religion is faring pretty well: villages where ceremonies had long disappeared revitalise them in a process that is ongoing. There is also no lack of sacrificial priests even though this 'vocation' is not a full-time activity: the sacrificial priest is a villager like everyone

else, chosen on the basis of his respected status in the community, with a family, a profession and a farmstead to care for.

At the moment vernacular religion is very much present in Udmurt life at least outside Udmurtia, although this does not guarantee it being retained for the future. What gives concern is the lack of language transmission to the younger generations, for the parents as a rule do not speak Udmurt with their children. While there are enough adults mastering the language today, what will happen tomorrow when the next generations of adult do not understand or speak Udmurt and so are unable to transmit it? This is the big challenge. (Toulouze and Anisimov 2020a)

Other religions have meanwhile not been idle. Orthodoxy, with strong state support, launched a new missionary enterprise in order to penetrate areas in which it is not traditional. The presence of new churches where there were none is testimony to this new policy. Protestants have also tried to increase their influence in new areas. Although in recent years the movement of foreign missionaries towards Russia has been wilfully limited by the state, internal Russia-based missions have replaced it.

From the Udmurt point of view, the Udmurt attitude towards religion has not changed: it is still one of total tolerance. However, one question remains: how, being surrounded by monotheistic religions, has monotheism influenced the vernacular religion, which initially was clearly polytheistic?

This question is complex and it is difficult to give it an absolute answer. We may however reflect on the question. Why does it emerge? It emerges clearly in the Udmurt prayers. While historically the polytheistic dimension was clear from the beginning in the addresses, with the enumeration of deities, it is no longer the case. For a long time now collective prayers have had a main addressee: "my Inmar Kylchin", says the priest. How to write it? As two separate words or as a unit connected with a hyphen? Inmar, as already mentioned, is the name of the supreme being in the Udmurt religion, but the second element is more enigmatic. There are two versions: the word *kylchin* exists in today's Udmurt language and means 'angel', so a 'supernatural' being. At the same time, we can read it as a contraction of the name of the second most important deity in the Udmurt pantheon, *Kyldysin*. Is this an address to two separate deities, or are they two aspects of one deity, Inmar being the supreme god and *kylchin* its avatar closer to people? How do people feel it? How do sacrificial priests reflect on this question? To complicate the mystery, while the prayer text is an address at the singular second person – "Inmar Kylchin, thou", in some cases the second person plural is also used, and sometimes both are used in the same prayer. What is the meaning of this difference? Is it a remnant of polytheism? The hyphen might give a hint, and indeed some sacrificial priests write Inmar Kylchin as two words, separated by a blank, by a coma or by a hyphen. So clearly the awareness is blurring or changing. So far I have not found this question either tackled or even broached in the literature.

Thus, today, the religious situation of the Udmurt is complex, with the presence of competing religions more or less linked to ethnicity. Moreover, not only are there several choices between denominations, but also the borders are blurred, especially the border between Orthodoxy and vernacular religion, for definite historical reasons. The aim of the article was to explore the situation and to comment on the chosen forms. This also explains why vernacular religion has been so much in focus: it is the most fluid element in the formulas, the one that can be adapted, and for the Udmurt, combined

with other forms of religiosity. It is not only an Udmurt characteristic, the Mari are also confronted with this situation, i.e. an historically imposed and well-defined Orthodoxy that had become familiar, and a vernacular religion that corresponds more to the people's worldview and which has long merged with the dominant religion. This hybridity is what make case studies so interesting and original, for the choice is not only between homogeneous elements, but also enters competition as a flexible familiar system that can be combined with others.

It is difficult to tackle this problem through statistics because it is difficult to measure the proportion of traditional elements in the Udmurt population's orthodoxy as this depends both on situation and individuality. So, the only choice was to explicate and describe different types of individual solution.

NOTES

1 Albeit that this notion is problematic (Bronner 2022; 2024; Valk 2023), I use it to refer to the intrinsically Udmurt religious practice that existed before Evangelisation and which continued to exist thereafter, although in changed ways. It is what the Mari have called 'traditional religion'.

2 The process started with the occupation of the capital of the Kazan khanate, with Moscow's initially aggressive conversion and repression policy – conversion for the animists, repression for the Muslims. But this policy did not last. In spite of several attempts to promote Orthodoxy, including increased pressure from the central state at the beginning of the 18th century, in the Volga area evangelisation was performed efficiently in the 1740–1767 period, with the activity of the Office for the Affairs of New Converts.

3 In the Udmurt core area, I had the privilege of seeing one in Karamas-Pel'ga (Kiyasa district) at the farmstead of now deceased Sedyk *apay* (in Udmurt *apay* means older sister or aunt, a respectful way of addressing an older lady) (FM 2017).

4 About cases of conflicts within one family I have been told by Udmurt folklorist and fieldworker Nikolay Anisimov (personal communication, 2019).

5 This group has come back to the Orthodox Church (FM 2022).

6 Usually the term used in Russian is 'pagan' (*yazychniki*). It is a term I would like to avoid in my writings, although I have to admit that it still expresses clearly a concept more difficult to express concisely. It is a term that has been totally interiorised and is used usually, both by scholars and lay people, without the least problematisation. For example, Udmurt scholar Vladimir Vladykin (2003: 307, 230), writing in Russian, justifies its use. I do not wish to use the word 'pagan' (or 'heathen') for several reasons, which have to do with certain connotations. Firstly, it is a term which is defined negatively: a 'pagan' is someone who is not a Christian and who may not be defined though the Abrahamic religions. I do not wish to rely on a Christian point of view, or to assume that Christianity is default. Christianity in this region is a late addition and while it has indeed become dominant, defining the vernacular religious practice through it is not convincing. Moreover, the term has kept some of its negative content because, from the Christian point of view, 'pagans' refuse to acknowledge a 'superior' religion. In addition, 'pagan' is, in our Western imagination, linked with antique mythological systems, with a strong polytheist basis. Whether today Udmurt vernacular religion is a 'polytheism' is under discussion. Moreover, the image we have of antique mythologies is of a very complex and structured pantheon, which anyhow does not fit with the fluid understandings of vernacular religion. Terminology is also discussed by Ranus Sadikov (2008: 5), who chooses to call this religious practice "traditional Udmurt religion", or "ethnic Udmurt religion".

7 I shall not use the term 'supernatural', because for the people themselves, these beings are fully integrated in the natural world, they are not distinct, separated from it.

8 This is the year when Catherine II decreed Freedom of religion in Russia. Forced conversions were outlawed.

9 Our informant, an Orthodox lady, commented that the priest always criticised them for it. They used to reply "yes, yes", but when he was not present, they continued according to their own rules.

10 I am aware that this notion is problematic (Engler and Grieve 2005): here I have in mind that vernacular religion relies on long accepted norms that can be fluid and evolve slowly. What is important here is that in this field, no forceful or abrupt changes have taken place.

11 This idea has been material by the Mari, who managed to have Mari traditional religion recognised as the region's official religion, alongside Orthodoxy, thus creating a double standard: an official one and a grassroots one (Alybina 2017).

SOURCES

FM = author's fieldwork materials. The respondents agreed to have their names published.

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