

# SIMĒK IN MODERN CHUVASH RITUAL CULTURE

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## ABSTRACT

The paper\* describes the features of the *Simĕk* ritual (compare *semik* in Russian) in different ethnic and religious (Orthodox Christian, ‘pagan’, Muslim) and ethnic and territorial groups of Chuvash. The author shows the key role of *Simĕk* in the structure of rituals of the *semik* and Trinity block and reveals its links with funerary, commemorative and wedding rites. *Simĕk* is one of the main rituals on the Chuvash ritual calendar. Traditionally, it is associated with commemoration customs of the people and is one of the three compulsory days of commemoration of family ancestors. It corresponds to *semik* in the Russian ritual calendar and is held either on Thursday (for unbaptised Chuvash) or on the Saturday before Trinity (for the majority of Orthodox Chuvash). Today *Simĕk* is performed in the villages as a commemoration ritual with a visit to the cemetery, which involves both villagers and those family members who live in cities. After visiting the cemetery family members conduct visits, turning a commemoration ceremony into a festival. Thus, *Simĕk* strengthens family links between villagers and city dwellers. With increasing levels of religiosity in society the importance of *Simĕk* as a means of preserving and spreading ethnic traditions has also increased. In modern rituals there is some structural transformation of *Simĕk* among the Orthodox community, but at the same time it is possible to trace the actualisation and expansion of the ritual together with the general trends in unification of the Chuvash ritual complex.

KEYWORDS: Chuvash • ritual calendar • commemoration ritual • festival • *semik* • *Simĕk*

## INTRODUCTION

The Chuvash are a Turkic-speaking people in Russia who have historically lived in Eastern Europe, in the middle reach of the Volga and in the Trans-Urals. The vast majority of the Chuvash has practiced Orthodoxy since the 18th–19th centuries. A small group of Chuvash (about 5,000 people) practice the traditional religion *chāvash tĕnĕ*. They live

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mainly in the southern regions of the Republic of Tatarstan and the northeastern areas of Samara region in about 50 villages. In local Chuvash groups in the Ural-Volga region there are Chuvash descendants who started practicing Islam in the middle of the 19th to early 20th century. According to the 2010 population census, 1,435,000 Chuvash live in Russia, out of a total world population of about 1.5 million (Dianov 2012: 72). In Russia they live in all regions, but mainly in the Volga Federal District: the Chuvash Republic (814,800), the Republic of Tatarstan (116,300), the Republic of Bashkortostan (107,500), Ulyanovsk region (95,000), Samara region (84,100), Orenburg region (12,500) and Saratov region (12,300). Today the vast majority, 88.6%, live in the Volga region, 2.9% in the Urals region and 2.8% in Western Siberia. The Chuvash also live abroad in the Ukraine (10,000), Uzbekistan (about 14,000), Kazakhstan (about 7,000), and others.

Chuvash ritual festive culture is determined by agricultural activities, which have developed over more than 2,000 years. Religious beliefs and practices were most clearly manifested in the agrarian cult, which integrated the cult of natural elements (earth, vegetation, water), the cult of the ancestors and the supreme god Tura. The most important rites in the Chuvash agrarian cult are those of the spring/summer cycle, including *Simēk*, which is one of the main rituals of the *semik* and Trinity block. Traditionally *Simēk* is one of three days when it is obligatory to commemorate the ancestors. Commemoration on *Simēk* is considered a 'day' prayer, and it therefore takes place during daylight. Candles in honour of the ancestors' spirits are lit in spring (*vattisen kunē*) and autumn (*Kēr sārī*), and are conventionally called 'morning' and 'evening' prayers (requiring appropriate lighting). (FM: 2000a; 2001)

Terminologically (the Russian word *semik* means the seventh week after *Munkun*<sup>1</sup> or Easter) and semantically *Simēk* is known, and is similar, in almost all areas inhabited by the Chuvash and can therefore be counted as part of the all-Chuvash ceremonial complex. At the same time in separate loci, for example in some Trans-Kama region villages in the middle and low reach of the river Bolshoy Cheremshan, the term is unknown (FM: 2008a), and summer commemoration of the ancestors is held on Wednesday on the eve of the Ascension.<sup>2</sup> When it is held on Holy Trinity, it is called *raditel*<sup>3</sup> (FM: 2003a).

The Chuvash *Simēk* is close in name and content to the spring/summer rites of the East Slavic peoples, such as memorial rites (*semik* on Thursday and Saturday before Trinity), *Rusal* Week, or *Rusal* Sunday before Whitsuntide (also known as Green Yule-tide; see more in Sokolova 1979: 188–223; Kremleva 1993: 31–33). *Simēk* also has similarities to the memorial rites of some Finno-Ugric peoples in the Ural-Volga region, for example, *Semyk* among the Mari (Kalinina and Popov 2005: 208–209). This suggests a possible pre-Christian ethnic influence on the formation of the *semik* and Trinity block in the Chuvash ritual calendar. Despite the fact that the Chuvash *Simēk* is associated with funeral customs (the famous Chuvash ethnologist Anton Salmin [2007: 165] defines it as "a summer kin holiday in which the ancestors are symbolic fed"), the meaning of the ritual action is not limited by the cult of ancestors, but includes a number of elements that were structurally and semantically related to other ceremonial cycles: the *chūk* public prayers, the *Sinse* period,<sup>4</sup> wedding rituals. This allows us firstly to revise the traditional approach to the interpretation of the rite (Salmin 2007: 165–169). Secondly, *Simēk* was inscribed not only in the overall context of the annual ritual calendar, it was also the main structural element of the *semik* and Trinity block semantically and logically linked to summer public prayers, circle dances and youth merrymaking. Thirdly, under

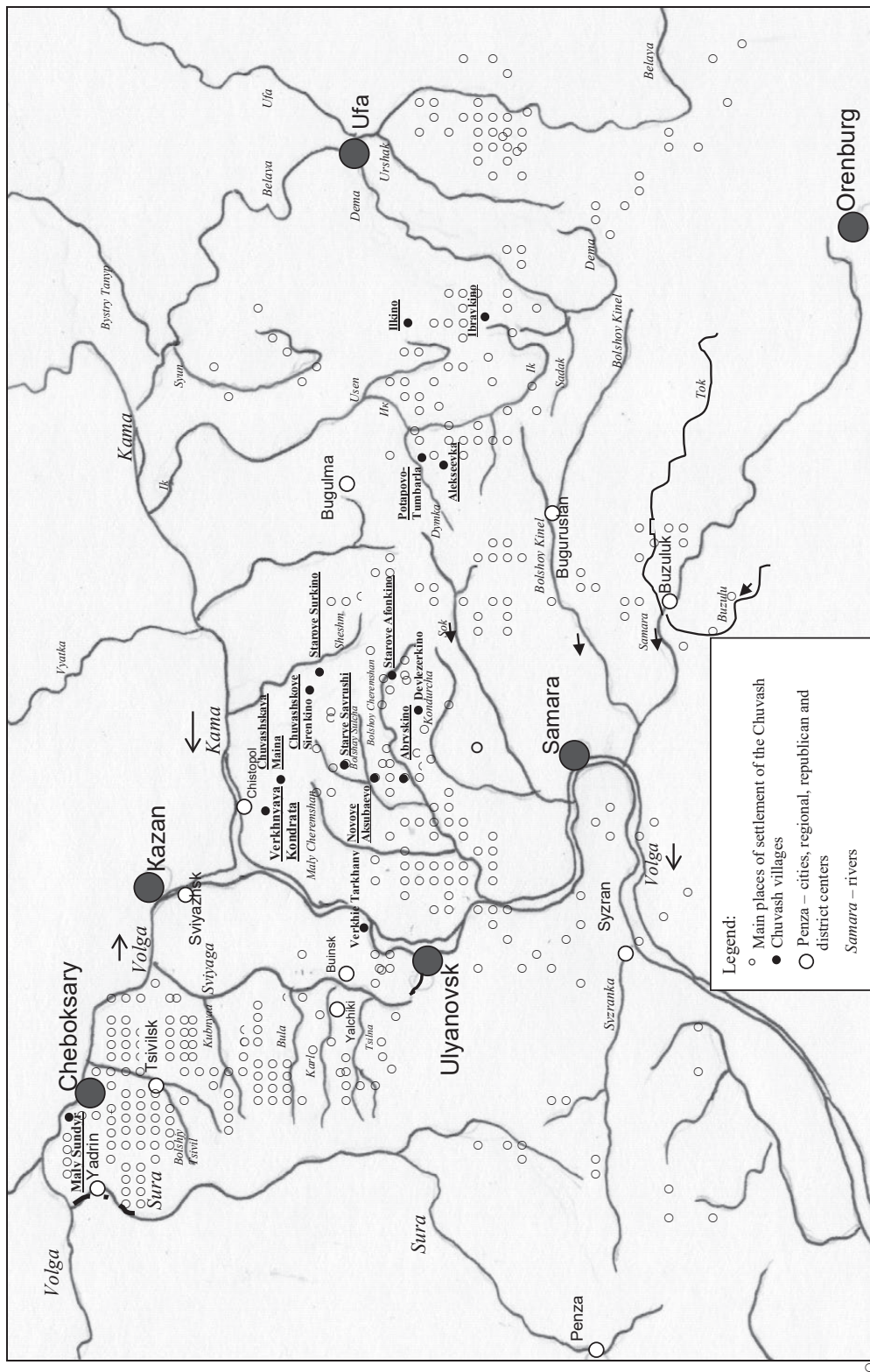


Figure 1. Map: Chuvash settlement in the Urals-Volga region.

the influence of Christianity and the 20th century modernisation of society, the structure of *semik* and Trinity rituals was transformed, causing the variability of the modern ceremonial complex in ethnic and confessional (baptised Chuvash, 'pagans', Muslims), and territorial, groups. This article will analyse the modern rite of *Simēk*, taking into account the three comments above.

The structure of the article is determined by its purpose – to consistently reveal the content and partly the functional characteristics of *Simēk* in the structure of Chuvash ritualism. First, it will be considered as a commemoration rite, then as part of a *semik* and the Trinity block and other summer rites, and finally as an ethnically marked Chuvash rite, which in the current context has acquired the new format of festival–ritual.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The article is written on the basis of the authors' field material collected in the 1998–2016 period in the regions of residence of the Chuvash in the Urals-Volga region, namely in the Samara, Ulyanovsk and Orenburg regions, the Republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, the Chuvash Republic, the cities of Moscow and Krasnoyarsk, and the foreign Chuvash communities in the Republic of Kazakhstan (in the city of Pavlodar) and the Republic of Belarus (in the city of Minsk) (FM: 1998–2016). During the interviews, the author collected data on the rites of the *semik* and Trinity block in the middle and second half of the 20th century, on contemporary rites in the countryside and in urban areas and on their local features in different areas. In addition the author collected data among different ethnic and religious groups (Orthodox Christians, 'pagans', Muslims).

While studying the topic a set of different methods (structural and typological, historical and comparative, areal, etc.) was used which helped diversify and comprehensively characterise the subject of study. Particular attention is paid to regional characteristics of ritualism, due to, first, variability of rites in traditional cultures being the norm (Putilov 2003: 159), and, second, the evident dialectal nature of the Chuvash ritual complexes, including *semik* and Trinity rites, and their terminology (Yagafova 2007). Consideration of the topic in the framework of cultural dialectology (Tolstoy 1995: 21, 37, 47) made it possible to create a complete picture of the block of rites functioning within the Chuvash population in the Urals-Volga region.

Simultaneously we analysed the structure of *semik* and Trinity ritualism, which helped determine the place taken by *Simēk* and its structure-forming role in the block, as well as the nature of its links with the other rites and rituals of the complex. It should be noted that in this context *Simēk* has not been studied by Chuvash ethnographers (Denisov 1959; Salmin 2007; Semenova 2016), who considered it merely a summer commemoration rite. In the descriptive context *Simēk* is represented in research of the 19th and first-half-of-the-20th century (Sboyev 1865; Paasonen 1949; Meszaros 2000 and others).

A prominent place in the study of the topic belongs to the analysis of *semik* and Trinity rituals in the context of current transformation processes occurring in the festive and ritual sphere of ethnic communities, including the Chuvash. The current processes of national and cultural revival are directly related to the actualisation of festive culture observed in all territorial ethnic groups, urban communities and Chuvash villages all

over Russia. However, changes in the social context of the festivals, especially in urban areas, the effect of modern mass culture, and modernisation and globalisation trends in the society are reflected in the function and content of festive culture. Thus, in 'mass' culture there is a strong tendency to turn a festival into a performance (Mazayev 1978: 171), and there is a loss of the boundaries between the secular and the sacred and a 'festivisation of everyday life' (Slyusarenko and Sysoyeva 2009), leading to a distortion of the original nature of the festival, which is probably indicative of the deep processes of festival transformation under modern conditions. The paper attempts to answer the questions: What are the trends in the development of *semik* and Trinity rituals in the context of a 'mass' culture and tendencies of transformation of festivals and rituals into spectacle? How did the structure of the ritualism change under the influence of these processes? How important for the Chuvash are modern *semik* and Trinity rituals as an ethnic phenomenon and do they help keep people's cultural identity, as Kazimezh Zhigul'skiy (1985: 86) puts it?

## DATA ANALYSIS

### *Simĕk Is a Ritual of Commemorating the Ancestors*

The unbaptised Chuvash and Christians who adhered to a more traditional chronology of the ceremonial calendar observe *Simĕk* on the Thursday before Trinity. However, the majority of Orthodox Chuvash in the 1970s and 1980s started celebrating it either on the Saturday before Trinity (Prisviyazh'ye in the Trans-Sviyaga region; FM: 2002a), or even on Trinity Sunday (Transurals region, Trans-Kama region). In those villages where unbaptised and baptised Chuvash live together, both communities can take part in the ceremony together on Thursday and Sunday (FM: 2005). For example, in the village of Staroye Savrushki in Aksubayevskiy district of the Republic of Tatarstan (RT) baptised Chuvash visit the cemetery on Thursday, having been influenced in this by the tradition of neighbouring unbaptised Chuvash (FM: 2005).

Different visiting times can be observed even within a single village. Thus, in the village of Chuvashskaya Mayna in Alekseyevskiy district, RT, young people prefer to visit the cemetery on Sunday, while the older generation on the night before (FM: 2008b). The possibility to visit the cemetery on different days is convenient for the people in neighbouring villages who manage to visit the graves of their relatives.

Things look different in the Trans-Kama region, where inter-confessional marriage between baptised and unbaptised Chuvash occurs often. Unbaptised Senkina Maria Tudiyarovna, born in 1927 in the village of Abryskino in Nurlatskiy district, RT, has lived since 1967 in the neighbouring village of Saldakayevo, where baptised and unbaptised Chuvash live together. She recalls:

*Simĕk* is on the Thursday before Trinity. People brew beer, boil eggs. We bake everything we can. I actually visit the cemetery on Trinity. People even come from the cities like for a fair. Probably, only people from Vladivostok do not come. All the rest are here. There are lots of cars all around the cemetery. And in Abryskino this happens on *Simĕk*. So I go there on *Simĕk* to visit my parents' grave. Abryskino

is 3 km away from here. In Abryskino Trinity is not observed. Until I moved to Saldakayevo I didn't know that there was such a holiday as Trinity. Once I used to whitewash the house from the inside on Trinity. Now I just celebrate: I go to the cemetery, then I set the table for the guests to enjoy the meal. I have not been christened though. But Trinity is not for staying at home alone. Go out, watch the people, have fun. (FM: 2008b)

The rite is preceded by *simēk munchi* – a ritual of bathing either the night before (Wednesday or Friday), or in the morning. Until the 1960s there was a rite in which young boys and girls brought freshly cut birch twigs from the forest to steam themselves, and newly-mown grass partly to infuse and wash themselves in the steam baths and partly to scatter in the house. The young people handed out some of the twigs to elderly villagers. Baths were heated the whole night, and while they were being prepared the young people sang songs around them and arranged merrymaking. Early in the morning, before pasturing the herd, all the family members bathed there in turn (FM: 1999). Today only the rite of steaming oneself with freshly cut whisks is observed.

The structure of the ceremony includes cooking the ritual food – beer, eggs and pancakes. According to the tradition, the first pancake should be given to a baby. It was permitted to feed dogs, but not cats (FM: 1999). Today only elderly people observe this rite, while the youth does not even know about it.

Commemoration of the ancestors begins at home. Dressed in clean clothes, each member of the family eats pancakes with honey while saying, "Let the dead relatives be full up. Let everything we eat be in front of them." At noon, people go to the cemetery. Due to participation of numerous relatives, including members of family-related groups living permanently in cities, there are usually lots of people in the cemetery. During this holiday the Chuvash living in remote regions of Russia and CIS countries usually plan their summer trips to their native land (FM: 2011a). This has resulted in the ceremony moving from Thursday to Saturday. Thus, *Simēk* strengthens family ties and contacts between the villagers and urban dwellers.

Ceremony participants visit the graves of their relatives and leave some food – pancakes, eggs, green onions, sweets, biscuits, fruit, vegetables – on the grave pillars for unbaptised, and on crosses for baptised, family members (see Photo 1). Then they pour water and other beverages on the graves. It is believed that in this way they "wine and dine" the dead. Before leaving the cemetery the participants eat and drink the treats that remain after feeding the dead. Orthodox Chuvash pray at the cemetery, sometimes together with a priest (FM: 2001; 2007). Visiting the grave of a dead relative is considered compulsory within a three-year period after the death (Semenova 2016: 46).

In some Trans-Kama and Transural villages people visit the cemetery on Trinity Sunday. In the village of Verkhnyaya Kondrata in Alekseyevskiy district, RT, the ceremony lasts until the afternoon, and after dinner *Sapantuy* begins.<sup>5</sup> Until the 1980s people collected gifts for the participants up to the eve of the holiday, such as kerchiefs and towels, and young people brought young birches from the forest. The gifts were presented when the young people sang and danced during the evening merrymaking. The remaining things were taken home, or they were thrown into the river. (FM: 2008b)

Despite the fact that a visit to the cemetery took place on Sunday, a significant part of *semik* rites in Verkhnyaya Kondrata was held on Thursday and the night before. On Thursday morning people visited the steam bath, using freshly cut birch twigs and



Photo 1. Commemoration of the ancestors at the cemetery in Staroye Afon'kino village, Shentalinskiy district, Samara region. 2001. Photo by the author.

herbs (in an interview described as follows: *sich tērlē kurāk pustarsa, milkē syhsa*, which means “to gather seven different herbs and to make a whisk”). To fire the furnace only stolen wood could be used, which was linked to violent youth behaviour, for example destroying log houses, woodpiles, etc., until the mid-1980s. This custom has now disappeared and is considered shameful: “Now they say it shameful. They say, bah, why make a tit of yourself. It’s even not about making a tit of yourself, society is quite different now.” (FM: 2008b, interview with Yelizaveta Ivanovna Paisheva).

In other villages, for example, in Chuvashskoye Siren'kino in Al'met'yevskiy district, RT, this custom is considered relatively new, having appeared after the war and persisted to the present. In this case, *Simēk*, according to informants’ statements, is associated mainly with youth violence and washing in steam baths rather than with the commemoration the dead at the cemetery (FM: 2003b). If people visited the cemetery on Saturday, the ritual of washing occurred on Wednesday night or early on Thursday morning (FM: 1998). So certain important structural elements of *Simēk* follow the traditional chronology.

### *Simēk in the Structure of Chuvash Summer Rituals*

Among unbaptised Chuvash of the Trans-Kama region, *Simēk* is combined into one cycle with a summer village prayer, *Uchuk*, and a prayer for rain, *Šumār chuk* (Photo 2), which were held on Thursday and Saturday of the next week respectively (FM: 2001).

Such periodicity of *semik* and Trinity rites is probably traditional with some elements of the rituals mentioned above kept for a long time among the officially Orthodox Chuvash. For example, in the Volga region near the cities of Saratov and Simbirsk people usually pour water on each other at *Simēk*. There the ritual was called *uchukka*, which means ‘farewell to the spring’ (*vesna āsatni*). Water pouring is also common among the Chuvash living near the town of Buzuluk where even a visit to the cemetery is considered a ritual of rainmaking (FM: 2000b).



Photo 2. *Šumār chūk* prayer in Staroye Afon'kino village, Shentalinskiy district, Samara region. 2001. Photo by the author.

Among baptised Chuvash, *Simēk* also makes up a single ritual complex with the Orthodox holiday of Holy Trinity. Baptised Chuvash consider *Simēk* a Chuvash holiday, and even the Chuvash Trinity: “The Chuvash have *Simēk*, the Russians, Trinity” (FM: 2002a). During Trinity relatives pay visits. In villages by the Sviyaga river people held *yal sārī* or *halākh sārī*<sup>6</sup> in the past (FM: 2002a). This tradition still exists in the downstream area; currently in a number of villages in Yal'chikskiy district of the Chuvash Republic they organise a village holiday at Trinity (FM: 2014a).

In *Simek* in the Trans-Volga and Transurals areas there is a period of *sinse* (also *sinche*), which lasted from one day to a week. Traditionally, it preceded the hay-making and was accompanied by prohibitions on work, lighting a fire, and wearing a *krashenina*, coloured linen (Yagafova 2007). But today these prohibitions are not applied and the term *sinse* is forgotten.

In the Trans-Kama area *Simĕk* is followed by *Uyav* (also *Vāyā*), the period of merry-making and round dances that have always been of great importance here (Novoye Aksubayevo village in Aksubayevskiy district, RT; Staroye Surkino village in Al'met'yevskiy district, RT; Staroye Afon'kino village in Shentalinskiy district, Samara region. See Photo 3.) In these villages at this time a special song, *simĕk yurry*, performed only on the day of *Simĕk*, appeared in the repertoire of *Uyav/Vāyā* songs (FM: 2003b).



Photo 3. *Uyav* in Staroye Afon'kino village, Shentalinskiy district, Samara region. 2015. Photo by the author.

At'ār, khērsem vārmana,  
Vērene s'ul'si khus'mashkān,  
Vērene s'ul'si pit khitre,  
S'apkalashsa vıl'yama.  
Kēper sinche vis nokhrat,  
Pērne manān ileschē.  
Pēr puyanān vis yvāl,  
Pērne manān kayaschē.

Come on, girls, into the wood,  
To cut maple twigs,  
Maple leaf is very good,  
To whip each other.  
On the bridge there are 3 nokhratkas,<sup>7</sup>  
I'd like to take one.  
A rich man's three sons,  
I'd like to marry one.

(*Simĕk yurry* from Chuvashskoye  
Siren'kino village, FM: 2003b)

In the Chuvash villages of Bavlinsky district, RT (Alekseyevka and Potapovo-Tumbarla) the youth sang *simĕk yurry* in a special place, on a hill called *simĕk sārĕhĕ* ('*semik* mountain'). This place was associated only with the *Simĕk* celebration. People lit bonfires, sang, and danced around the fires. After walking around the local area and cutting birch whisks, the youth returned to the village singing comic songs that made fun of lovers:

Chĕvĕl-chĕvĕl sersisem,  
s'ap ayānche vāyisem,  
Annapa Aleshān  
Vyṛān ayēnche vāyisem.

Weet-weet sparrows  
Are messing around under the branches,  
Anna with Alyosha  
Are playing under the bed.

(Alekseyevka village, FM: 2002a)

The girls brought flowers from the forest to stick in the window frames. Then they began to heat the steam baths. The boys helped them, but they often horsed around – knocked over woodpiles, or a shelf in a bath house, or removed the bath house door.

The next day the youth merrymaking continued. Having gathered in groups, young boys and girls went back into the forest, where they danced in a round and sang *simĕk yurry*:

Ayakranakh kurānat' pĕr s'uti,  
Numayyakh ta tāmĕ te, khal' sūnĕ,  
Numayyakh ta tāmĕ te, khal' sūnĕ.  
Pirĕn samṛāk ĕmĕrsem – s'es'ke  
vākhāt,  
Numayakh ta tāmĕ te, khal' irtĕ,  
Numayakh ta tāmĕ te, khal' irtĕ.

The light is seen from far away,  
But it will soon go out,  
But it will soon go out.  
The time of our youth is the time of flowering,  
Not long it will last – it will soon pass,  
Not long it will last – it will soon pass.

Shur kurnitsa uraine shālsa tytār,  
Shur kalpaklā achāra vylyama,  
Shur kalpaklā achāra vylyama.  
Ep yurlama yuratap – asra tytār,  
Ep asāra kilsessĕn yurlama,  
Ep asāra kilsessĕn yurlama.

In a white chamber sweep the floor,  
For a baby in a white cap to play,  
For a baby in a white cap to play.  
I love to sing, remember this,  
For you to sing remembering me,  
For you to sing remembering me.

(Alekseyevka village, FM: 2002a)

The older generation celebrated separately. After going to the cemetery they visited relatives, which turned the commemoration ritual into a festival (FM: 2001; 2014b).

This practice of *semik* and Trinity rites existed until the 1970s. Currently people do not sing *semik* songs, although older informants still remember them. The traditions of bonfires on the hill (rubber is burnt) and steam baths with fresh whisks are maintained, but youth 'violence' is no longer observed. (FM: 2002a)

Among Orthodox Chuvash who have lived in the Russian environment for a long time, where Russian songs penetrated ritual folklore, a 'farewell to spring' ceremony was included in the ritual calendar and was celebrated with Russians: people dressed and curled birch trees, twined wreaths of flowers and told fortunes, throwing them into the river – wreaths sinking portended misfortune. The rite was kept until the beginning of the 2000s. (FM: 2008c) Streets and facades of houses were decorated with birch branches, and small birch trees were placed in a row along the street (FM: 2002a). In

Chuvash-Kryashen village of Verkhnyaya Kondrata in Alekseyevskiy district, RT, birches were set in the middle of the main streets: two on the Kryashen<sup>7</sup> side, and one on the Chuvash side. With this birch the Chuvash circled in the dance and in the evening they threw it into the water (FM: 2008b). In the Chuvash and Mordovian villages, such as Verkhniye Tarkhany in Tetyushskiy district, RT, the festival consolidates both ethnic groups, and Trinity songs are sung here in two languages (Semenova 2016: 47).

While in most areas of Chuvash habitation the *semik* cycle finished on Trinity Sunday, in some villages people used to celebrate *Kēsēn simēk* ('small *semik*') and 'bid farewell' to the holiday on this day (*simēk āsatni*). Thus, in the village of Il'kino in Belebeyevskiy district of the Republic of Bashkortostan on the first Sunday after Trinity young people brought out of the wood two freshly cut birches passing with them through the village and singing a special song called *Kavaleshki*, which was unknown in neighbouring villages. The procession went out to the village outskirts by the river to throw birch trees, wreaths or bunches of herbs into the water. If they sank, rather than floating, it portended death or other misfortune (FM: 2002b). Remarkably a similar tradition of finishing Trinity rites that coincided with the dates of the rituals described here was practiced among the Russians in the southern Kama river area (Chernykh 2006: 138).

As can be seen from the above description, rituals with birch trees are an obligatory part of *semik* rituality, and these spread in Chuvash settlement areas that had contact with Russians. In modern summer ritualism birch branches decorate homes, gates and window frames, and trees decorate festival venues and village streets (FM: 2015). Outside walls and window frames are stuck with branches of mountain ash, or sometimes with acacia or hazel wood, which, on the one hand, are to protect the house from evil spirits, and on the other hand, serve as a place of rest for the dead relatives' souls (which visit the living during *Simēk*) (Semenova 2016: 47).

*Simēk* was closely connected with another ceremonial complex, i.e. weddings. In some Trans-Volga villages wedding guest 'train' visits began on Thursday and continued until Saturday, while on Trinity Sunday the bridegroom's 'train' took the bride from her parents' or godparents' home (FM: 1999). Today weddings can be held at any time of the year and are not restricted to Trinity.

### *Simēk as an Ethnically Marked Chuvash Ritual*

In most Chuvash areas, where the tradition of *Simēk* has been kept for a long time in a ritualised form (violence, washing in steam baths, visiting the cemetery, guesting, youth merrymaking, singing special songs in special places, etc.), *Simēk* is one of the basic ethnically marked elements of the Chuvash traditional ritual calendar and is recognised both by the Chuvash and their neighbours. For example, the people of Alekseyevka village in Bavlinsky district, RT, consider it the Chuvash Trinity. However, the Kryashens of Verkhnyaya Kondrata village emphasised that *Simēk* is a Chuvash custom that the Kryashens do not follow (FM: 2002a).

It is noteworthy that *Simēk* is still relevant in the ritualism even when someone changes confession, for example among the Chuvash Muslims. As part of the 'pagan heritage' the rite is an obligatory element of commemoration ceremonies in all groups of the Chuvash Muslims. Among the people of Ibryaykino village in Bizhbulyakskiy dis-

trict of the Republic of Bashkortostan (RB), who consistently adhere to Muslim customs and who are Muslims by religion and 'Tatars' by ethnicity, the custom of visiting the cemetery during *Simēk* has been maintained, although in this case people have a commemoration meal outside the cemetery (FM: 2004). Thus, in the situation of interethnic and inter-confessional contacts, *Simēk* becomes one of the symbols of Chuvash identity.

With the increase of religiosity in modern society, the importance of *Simēk* as a means of keeping and transmitting ethnic traditions has increased. It is noteworthy that in some Chuvash villages in the Trans-Kama region, where previously this tradition had been absent for five or six years, it is being promoted as part of Orthodox and, at the same time, Chuvash commemoration ritualism. For example, in Devlezerkino village in Chelno-Vershinskiy district of the Samara region spring commemoration of the ancestors with a visit to their graves in the cemetery was traditionally held on the Wednesday before the feast of the Ascension of Christ. However, in recent years some of the activists in the local religious community insisted on shifting the commemoration day to the Saturday before Holy Trinity, arguing that "all Orthodox Christians commemorate on this day" (FM: 2014b). As a result, between 2014 and 2020 most villagers visited the cemetery before Ascension, the minority before Trinity. Some people went to the cemetery twice. Revision of religious practices leads to conflict within the religious community (FM: 2020a).

#### *Simēk in the Context of Modern Chuvash Festive and Ritual Culture*

In the last decade, a number of Chuvash rituals have adopted a new format and become festivals. *Simēk* is not an exception. As early as 2011 Chuvash urban national cultural organisations in Samara organised a concert featuring folk groups in one of the city squares and called it *Simēk* (FM: 2011b). In 2016 the Union of Chuvash Local History Specialists initiated an all-Chuvash folk festival called *Simēk* to be held in Malyy Sundyr' village in Cheboksary district of the Chuvash Republic. It was attended by delegations from Samara, the Crimea, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan and Estonia. The festival program included a blessing by the elders, ritual lighting of a purifying fire, the *Hēragi* (*khēr aki*, 'dievichy plough land') ceremony around the site, setting tribal pillars, round dancing, the opening of the centre of local history and tourism, laying out the Alley of Ancestors, sporting competitions, awards for participants and local historians, and a concert with Chuvash performers. The organisers intend the festival to revive the tradition of community meetings – *pohhi* or *Hravutti pohhi* – that existed until the beginning of the 20th century.

Unlike the commemoration ritual, the festival *Simēk* took place on June 25, a week after the *Simēk* ceremony on the Saturday of Trinity week, thus not breaking the structure of *semik* and Trinity ritualism, but rather expanding it with this innovation. The location for *Simēk* was not accidentally chosen. The festival was held in Chemen Carty ('site Chemenya', named after the legendary Chuvash folk hero Chemenya), near the village of Malyy Sundyr' in Cheboksary district of the Chuvash Republic, a historical site known as a staging ground for the troops of Ivan the Terrible and used by merchants and travellers. A local history and tourism centre has also been opened here. (FM: 2016)

Thus, in the course of preparing and holding *Simēk* a new format, that of festival-ritual, was introduced combining religious and ritual forms and secular traditions. The new format allows changes to be made to the traditional dates of celebration. However, in doing so historical events and related contexts are actualised and acquire new sacred content.

At the same time, the festival has received an ambivalent assessment in the Internet, on organiser Vitaliy Stan'yal's Facebook page, where the announcement of the upcoming event was posted: "With all due respect, in my opinion, *Simēk* cannot be held in this format. This is a nationwide festival, but people celebrate it in their own villages, commemorate ancestors at their own cemeteries."; "It's purely a family tradition. They go to the graves of their ancestors, commemorate them." (FM: 2020b) Thus, given that *Simēk* is within the context of the religious practice of all ethnic and religious groups of Chuvash, it will hardly be accepted by the public as a mass celebration.

## CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of modern rituals of the *semik* and Trinity block leads to the following conclusions:

1) *Simēk* is a structure-forming element of the *semik* and Trinity block on the Chuvash ceremonial calendar that includes a series of rituals; however, a dominant position in the structure of the rite still belongs to a memorial ritual.

2) The ritual varies in local groups due to the fact that the structure of the ceremony includes elements that are semantically identical to ritual actions in other rituals, for example, fortune telling using wreaths (which in the *Uyav* are takes place during the farewell to *Uyav*), ritual violence (which in other loci takes place during the New Year or Easter cycles).

3) *Simēk* is a stable and functional tradition in different religious groups of Chuvash, i.e. among 'pagans' and Orthodox. With the former it maintains the most traditional forms and is an ethnically marking phenomenon among the majority.

4) In modern ritualism there is some structural transformation of *Simēk* among the Orthodox community (shifting the day to Saturday or Sunday, exclusion of a number of rituals), although at the same time one can trace the actualisation of the ritual and the expansion of its area together with the general trend of unification of the ritual complex (formation of the all-Chuvash ceremonial complex).

5) In the context of current transformation processes *Simēk* is obviously 'drifting' toward becoming a festival-ritual. New contours of its space, time and content characteristics are practically outlined.

In general, *Simēk* is a living, developing phenomenon in modern Chuvash religious and ritual culture; it is in the sphere of practices that are currently important and ethnically significant to the people.

## NOTES

1 *Munkun/Mānkun* – literally ‘great day’, celebration of the New Year according to the ancient Chuvash calendar, with the adoption of Christianity merged with Easter. Unbaptised Chuvash celebrate on the Wednesday before Orthodox Easter.

2 The Ascension of Christ is one of the Christian holidays in memory of Jesus Christ’s Ascension, celebrated on the 40th day after Easter, on Tuesday. Commemoration of ancestors is held on Wednesday on the day of ‘leavetaking of Easter’, which most of the Chuvash do not observe.

3 *Raditel* – the day of commemoration of the ancestors, derived from the corresponding Russian word.

4 *Sinse* – the time of rest of the land, during which all agricultural, construction and other activities were strictly prohibited. For most of the Chuvash *Sinse* began with *Simēk* and lasted from three days to two weeks in different areas.

5 *Sapantuy* is a festival at the end of spring sowing.

6 *Yal sārī* or *halākh sārī* (literally ‘village beer’ or ‘folk beer’) is an all-village festival in organisation of which, including making beer and a mutual meal, all villagers take part.

7 *Nokhratka* – a silver coin imitation, which was used to decorate girl’s headwear.

8 The Kryashens – professing Orthodoxy ethnic and confessional group within the Tatars. They live mainly in the Republic of Tatarstan, in small numbers in the Republic of Bashkortostan and the Udmurt Republic, as well as in Chelyabinsk, Samara and 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, a little more than 45,000 Kryashens live in Russia (see Dianov 2012).

## SOURCES

FM = Author’s fieldwork materials from 1998–2020. Materials are kept in the author’s possession.  
FM: 1998 = Samara region, Klyavlinitskiy district (Erilkino village) and Shentalinskiy district (Staroye Afon’kino village).

FM: 1999 = Samara region, Isaklinskiy district.

FM: 2000a = Republic of Tatarstan, Nurlatskiy district.

FM: 2000b = Orenburg region, Grachevskiy district (Verkhneignashkino village).

FM: 2001 = Samara region, Shentalinskiy district (Staroye Afon’kino and Saleykino villages).

FM: 2002a = Republic of Tatarstan, Bavlinsky district (Alekseyevka, Potapovo-Tumbarla villages); Buinskiy and Tetyushskiy districts.

FM: 2002b = Republic of Bashkortostan: Belebeyevsky district.

FM: 2003a = Ulyanovsk region, Melekesskiy district (Chuvashskoye Appakovo).

FM: 2003b = Republic of Tatarstan, Alkeyevsky district and Al’met’yevskiy district (Chuvashskoye Siren’kino, Staroye Surkino villages).

FM: 2004 = Republic of Bashkortostan, Bizhbulyakskiy district (Ibryaykino village).

FM: 2005 = Republic of Tatarstan, Nurlatskiy district (Yakushkino village); Aksubayevskiy district (Starye Savrushkiy village).

FM: 2007 = Samara region, Klyavlinitskiy district.

FM: 2008a = Samara region, Koshkinskiy district (Russkaya Vasil’yevka village); Chelno-Vershinskiy district (Devlezerkino and Staroye Eshteben’kino villages).

FM: 2008b = Republic of Tatarstan, Alekseyevskiy district (Verkhnyaya Kondrata village) and Nurlatskiy district (Saldakayevo village).

FM: 2008c = Republic of Bashkortostan, Bakalinskiy district (Bugabash village).

FM: 2011a = Republic of Belarus, Minsk.  
 FM: 2011b = Samara.  
 FM: 2014a = Chuvash Republic, Yal'chikskiy district.  
 FM: 2014b = Samara region, Klyavinskii district (Boriskino-Igar village) and Chelno-Vershinskii district (Devlezerkino village).  
 FM: 2015 = Krasnoyarsk.  
 FM: 2016 = Cheboksary.  
 FM: 2020a = Samara region, Chelno-Vershinskii district (Devlezerkino village).  
 FM: 2020b = Stan'yal, Vitaliy. Personal page on Facebook. [https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100009356114488&fref=pb&hc\\_location=friends\\_tab&pnref=friends.all](https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100009356114488&fref=pb&hc_location=friends_tab&pnref=friends.all) (accessed October 13, 2020).

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