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# SACRIFICIAL RITES OF THE UDMURTS ON THE EASTERN BANK OF THE RIVER KAMA

*Tatiana Minniakhmetova*

On the eastern bank of the River Kama in the north-western district of Bashkiria and the Kueda district of the Perm province lives a small group of ethnic Udmurts. These Udmurts hold on to heathen traditions that have been strongly affected by the formation of the major world religions. The present article is dedicated to the sacrificial rites of Udmurts in the context of ritual behaviour, with occasional comparisons with the tradition of other ethnic Udmurt groups.

Sacrifice has always had an important role in Udmurt rituals, both collective and daily, random and special. N. G. Pervukhin, a leading expert on Udmurt ethnography notes that

*the very essence of their prayers lies in the act of sacrifice rather than in the act of praying* (Pervukhin 1888: 1).<sup>1</sup>

The subject has been directly or indirectly discussed by different researchers who have studied the Udmurt culture. Some contemporary scholars share Pervukhin's views (Vladykin 1994; Khristoliubova 1984; 1995).

Collective sacrifices were and still are performed at certain calendar, family and tribal festivities. Special collective offering rituals are held after major disasters in the village or region. All rituals, irrespective of their type, are organised by sacrificial priests and their assistants. Every ritual act is performed at a specific location and following a certain order. Family offerings performed at the beginning and end of major farm works and at important family events play an important role in the tradition of sacrificing. Individual sacrifices contributing to general welfare of the world may be performed at any time and any place.

Nearly all types of offerings described by earlier researchers are sacrificed up to the present day. However, today the sacrifice of

horses or cattle is very rare, while wild fowl or silver coin sacrificing has practically disappeared. The former costly offerings have been substituted by common inexpensive objects.

The offerings of the Udmurts on the eastern bank of the River Kama could be roughly divided in two: **foodstuff** and **objects**.

## SACRIFICIAL FOOD

In general, food offering is usually referred to as *s'ion-juon* 'food-drink'. All edibles are called *n'an'* (meaning 'bread' in contemporary Udmurtian), a term carrying both sacred and ethical meaning. Whereas the term *s'ion-juon* denotes common food, *n'an'* expresses respect. Although the words carry similar meaning, there is a considerably semantic difference.

### Grain food

Sacrificial food is primarily in the form of processed grain. First of all, the *dzhuk* porridges made of millet, wheat, and oatmeal should be mentioned, as well as flour jelly *piz' shukken*. At collective services mixed grain porridges are made, while at familial or tribal services, one-grain porridge (usually millet or wheat meal) is common. The *n'an'* bread is also made of grain and any sacrificial ritual can be carried out with this. Under special circumstances, bread can even be used without the traditional ceremonial preparation. In addition to bread, sourdough pancakes *taban'*, non-sour pancakes *mul'ym* and tough thin round pancakes *kuarn'an'* are prepared.<sup>2</sup> Ceremonial *kuar n'an'* are usually with meat filling.

### Sacrificial beverages

Beverages play an important role in all Udmurt rituals. The beer *sur* has been used since prehistoric times at festive or less festive rituals. In the summertime, home-brewed root beer *s'ukas'* is sometimes used. The hereafter residents are offered a home-stilled spirits *kumyshka* and tea. Cannabis oil *ke nem vöi* was considered a special dessert. It was common practice in the whole Udmurt region that after finishing certain farm works (e.g. harvesting the crops, picking berries and fruits) a small proportion of the crops was sacrificed to the *genius loci*.

## **Animal sacrifice**

Animal sacrifice is an ancient tradition among the Udmurts still playing an important role in the sacrificial tradition. Ostrovski (1874: 38) observed that *the number of sacrificed large animals sometimes reached as high as 60*. According to some researchers,

*the most important and indispensable accessory to the most important rites was a swan couple. The swans were sometimes obtained at a quite high price, 25 to 40 roubles. Until the ceremony, the swans were held in the highest respect and fed with delicacies. I never found out what the function of the swans at religious ceremonies was. ... At the end of the offering ritual the swans were taken in an adorned three-horse carriage to the Viatka River and set free after hanging a small silver coin around their necks (Ibid.).*

Today, even old people cannot recall participating in such a ritual.<sup>3</sup> However, goose and duck sacrifices still play an important part in the ceremonies related to the changing of seasons and the cycle of life.

It is common belief that out of all animals, gods prefer white horses, yellow colts, but also cows and sheep. The blood, intestines, and bones were sacrificed separately. Remarkably high was the number of eggs sacrificed and no ceremony was held without butter. It was common practice to use milk for preparing the sacrificial food.

## **SACRIFICE ON DIFFERENT OCCASIONS**

### **Collective sacrifice**

Although they may vary regionally, many of the sacrificial ceremonies discussed have survived up to the present day. Festive collective rituals *mör vös'*, *byddz'ym vös'*, *yshtijak vös'*, *el'en vös'*, etc. have been preserved (or revived) in most regions.<sup>4</sup> The aim and content of the rituals as well as their time of performance is no different from the traditions of previous centuries. In the 19th century N. Smirnov described a ritual performed after finishing sowing and the sacrifices offered:

*During the Gorbar,<sup>5</sup> on June 29, gods are offered only the blood of sacrificial animals, which is poured into the holes dug in the ground, and the bones which are thrown to the sparse thicket. (Smirnov 1890: 228)*

*The North-Eastern Udmurts held their prayers by the river Bui. In the village of Staraia Kyrga in the former Ossinski county, sacrificial animals varied from one year to the other: one year a rusty colt was sacrificed, the next year – a black ox. (Yemelianov 1921: 114)*

I. Smirnov has mentioned that *at the “busy vös” in the Birski county two sheep, one white and one black, were sacrificed* (Smirnov 1890: 225).<sup>6</sup>

According to informants, habitants of the Shaviady village in the Baltachevo region of Bashkiria used to sacrifice a year-old colt during their winter ceremony *tol vös*.<sup>7</sup> Nowadays, it is common to sacrifice a calved ewe, a ram, or two geese.

The ceremony of *kuar vös’an* (‘the prayer of leaf’) was not very common.<sup>8</sup> For this occasion, porridge with milk was made and placed into a small hole in a forest clearing.

Today, at the ceremony of *dz’eg busyly vös’* (‘prayer for rye field’) performed in the Aribashevo village in the Tatyshly region of Bashkiria, a black sheep is sacrificed to the land spirit *muzjem-kylshin*, and at the big ceremony of *byddz’ym vös’*, a white goose is offered to the sky spirit *in kylshin*.

In Balziuga village in the same region, three kinds of animals, or *kuin’ dz’yropydo* ‘the three with heads and feet’ are sacrificed at the collective ceremony: a black sheep to the Earth (*muzjem ponna*), a white sheep to the bright world (*dz’ugyt dunne ponna*), and a goose to the supreme god Inmar.

Only men, regardless of age, could take part in the ceremony of *kuarn’an’ vös*, and only male animals were sacrificed: a white and a black ram and a male goose. Home-made *kurn’an’*, the tough thin round pancakes, are ate during the ceremony.

## Exceptional sacrifice

Like in the old times, people still hold spontaneous rituals brought about by unfavourable weather conditions or serious calamities or accidents. In addition to regular offerings, there are also exceptional occasions when a ritual is performed after certain accidents – for example plague or crop failure. According to the 19th century researcher who had studied the Udmurt of the Birsky county in the Ufa province, on such occasions collective ceremonies (*el'en vös'*) were held, sometimes participated by several villages; and cows and colts were sacrificed (Smirnov 1890). Such offerings are conducted nowadays as well, but the animals sacrificed are much smaller compared to the ones mentioned.

## Family and tribal sacrifice

In the past, various wild fowl were sacrificed, like the swans mentioned above. P. Pallas described the celebration of *Vissesko-Nunal* (actually *vös'as'kon nunal* 'the prayer day') conducted the day before hay making in one or several households, when a woodpecker caught and fattened for this very occasion was sacrificed and burnt in fire when praying for fine weather and comfort in hard work (Pallas 1788: 35).

The patrons of the tribe or family were most often prayed to in the praying house *kua / kuala*. Since many people nowadays do not have prayer houses, the ceremonies are held in the iconic corner, yard, garden, field, or elsewhere. Bread, butter, and honey are important requisites of the ceremony.

Describing the *byddz'ym akashka* festivities among the Udmurts of the Mamadysh county of the former Kazan province, B. Gavrilov writes that after saying prayers bread, a bowl of honey, and a conifer twig are placed on a shelf for *kualas vozshud* – the patron of the tribe and family.<sup>9</sup>

## Sacrifice to the guardian spirits of the house

Several ceremonies were devoted to the spirits of home and house. The autumn sacrifice to *mu kylshin* was probably intended for the spirit who looked after the household.<sup>10</sup> G. Aptiev describes the annual sacrifice of a goose, sheep, ox, or even colt in every yard on

this occasion. The meat of sacrificial animals was to be eaten only by the family members, *as näshilezly*. Even a married daughter was not allowed to eat, as she was already part of her husband's family, and neither were the neighbours<sup>11</sup> (Aptiev 1891: 120). The ceremony of *tshuzh shun'y vös'an* (the sacrificing of yellow horse) was held for the same purpose in every couple of years, if necessary.

Sacrificing to the house spirit *korka kuz'o* was strictly followed. In many households, it was performed after moving to a new house; in some locations, the ritual was held annually. The inhabitants of the Novye Tatyshly and Vyazovka villages of the Tatyshly region sacrificed a black ram in the basement to *gulbesh taka*<sup>12</sup> ('the basement ram') saying, *Gulbeshly dz'an s'otis'kom, korka kuz'oly, dz'yrt kuz'oly* ('To the basement, we give life (the soul), to the house spirit, to the household spirit'). Usually, the animal was killed at the same spot, its meat was used to make soup that could be eaten only by the new inhabitants. The bones were burnt in the oven. In the village of Votyak Urada in the Yanaul region, a loaf of bread wrapped in a white cloth was placed under the icon corner of the house every year for *korka kuz'o* and *gulbesh taka*, the house spirits.

### **Sacrifices to the sacred grove**

In the areas on the eastern bank Kama, it was common to pray in the sacred grove called either *lud* or *keremet*. Unlike other fairies and spirits, *lud* and *keremet* had to be asked to not hurt people or animals. Nobody could go empty-handed to the fenced corner of *keremet*.<sup>13</sup> Everybody had to always bring something along to sacrifice; in case of a father and son, they both had to bring an offering. If the son did not have an offering gift, he was not to enter the secluded corner. The sacrifice for *keremet* was held in late autumn, for Inmar and Kyldysin until the *Pokrov*; after that the gods must not be sacrificed to, because "then the earth rests" (Potanin 1880–1882: 203).

P. Pallas describes the earliest *keremet* ritual:

*the greatest ceremony – Keremet Nunal – is held with festive sacrifice after finishing harvesting and other field works in the offering place, or keremet. Most commonly, a horse, preferably brownish red, is sacrificed. If no horses of brownish red or other*

*colour except black are found, an ox, sheep, goose, and duck are sacrificed and eaten. First of all, smaller animals are sacrificed; then the assistant of the tona [prophet, the main organiser, priest] kills the horse and prepares it as sacrificial meal. The blood, lard-filled maw, and most of the bones are burnt, the heads of ox and sheep and all horse bones are hung up on a spruce growing in the area of keremet. The hides could be taken home and then sold. (Pallas 1788: 35)*

At the ceremony of *keremete pyroni* ('the going to the *keremet*') in every village of Tatyshly region, three kinds of animals were sacrificed: a white goose, a white and a black ram. While saying the prayer, bannocks were held in hand; sourdough or yeast dough pastry were not allowed at *keremet*.

During the offering of a silver coin *dz'uges'* to *keremet*, the villagers of Sarsaz in the Burayevo region of Bashkiria said: *Kozma, Kylshine, bereketde s'ot, tau Inmare-Kylshine* (Lord, bless us, give us prudence [*bereket* means also 'prosperity' in dialect], thank you, my Inmar-Kylshin. Amen). In the village of Budzi Variash in the Yanaul region, egg pancakes *kuregpuz taban'* were baked when going to the *lud*. During the performance of those rituals, it was made certain that hens, dogs, and pigs were kept away from the sacrificial food.

### **Sacrifice to the dead**

The sacrificial role of hens and roosters is rather interesting. Differently from other animals and birds, they were sacrificed only to the dead or evil spirits – birds who scratch backwards must be associated with the deceased and evil spirits.<sup>14</sup> During spring and autumn collective funerals, it was common to sacrifice a hen or a rooster and boil it into a barley soup *pös' shyd*.

In the Bolshoy Kachaky village in the Kaltassinky region of Bashkiria, a hen or a rooster was sacrificed during the funeral and cooked in the soup. The stock was poured into a bowl for the dead; the head of the sacrificial bird and ritual pasty was placed into a bowl that was taken outside, northward.



Unlike other sacrificial food, funeral food had to be shared with dogs and fowl. At the funeral, porridge and pancakes were made and put on the table in bowls. The mourners lit six candles around the food and said their prayers. When the candles were burnt out, the pancakes laid upon the porridge were thrown to the dogs (Rychkov 1887: 132–133). This tradition is still followed. On the commemoration day, people go anticlockwise to the cemetery and throw ritual food, alcohol, and tea on their relatives' graves.

The custom of leaving sacrificial food on the table for the dead was called *puktis'kon* (*puktis'kyny* 'to set out', 'to set the table'); the "feeding" of the dead in the cemetery was called *kujas'kon* (*kujas'kyny* 'to throw').<sup>15</sup> The sacrifice of animals and foodstuff to gods and spirits was called *vös'an* (*vös'any* 'to sacrifice', 'to consecrate').

There is another rather unique custom called *jyr-pyd s'oton* ('the giving of head and feet') related to dead ancestors. A year (or more) after the death of their parents, the daughter sacrifices a cow to her mother and the son sacrifices a horse to his father. After the ceremony, the skull and the shins of the sacrificial animal are taken to the woods or the sacred grove and hung up on the trees.

In the old times, the ritual killing of a black hen was a common cure for diseases. Sometimes a rooster was killed at a winter crop field and its head and feet were buried, so that it could peck worms (Gavrilov 1891); nowadays, this tradition is rare. The killing of rabid dogs or puppies was unusual: young people made a fire using two wooden sticks while grazing the animals, then the dog was chopped in half, burnt and a symbolic line was drawn on the ground which the livestock crossed (the village of Aribash in Tatyshly region).

## SACRIFICIAL OBJECTS

Various material objects form an important part of sacrifices. The most valuable sacrifice is money.

Until the present day, silver coins are left in *dz'ugesh' keremet*. Entering the *keremet*, or in case someone wishes to mow grass in the sacred grove, he asks for permission to enter and leaves a coin. In old times, money was put under the ritual tree or in its hollowing during ceremonies. A coin (or bread) as well as pebbles, plants,

and wooden objects is thrown to the water spirit *vukuz'o* when crossing the river. A bride, fetching water from the spring on her wedding day, redeems herself from the fairy with a silver coin. Before going for a swim, something is thrown into the water, saying: *Mone en kut, tae kut!* (Don't take me, take (the item) instead!).

To find relief from illness and disease, pieces of cloths and fabrics are hung near the springs. Skin diseases are blamed on the person having blown his nose or spat into the water, or who reviled the spirit, so that "the water caught him". The diseases have been cured by throwing barley and salt, tied in a piece of linen, into the river or spring (Aptiev 1892: 120). In the village of Shavyady in Baltachevo region, when the disease is suspected of having been inflicted by the water spirit (*vukoz'o*), it is common to throw millet grains into the water, saying: *Vu ke kutem, med lez'oz, intaje med kutoz* (If the water has caught, let go, take this instead!).

Sacrifice to water spirits was performed during the spring flood. In autumn, before the water froze over, the Udmurts of Bui sacrificed a goose or a duck.

In case of unexpected diseases, it was believed that *kuala kutem* 'the spirit of Kuala' had caught the person. Strips of fabric were hung in the iconic corner or on a branch of birch poked onto the wall. In some regions, a grouse was sacrificed (the village of Staryi Variash in the Yanaul region).

When someone stumbled or fell, and hurt himself or fell ill, it was believed that he had stumbled upon the Earth Devil. In order to please him, a loaf of bread with egg was hidden to the ground after dark.

### **Sacrifice on departure**

Many reports of traditions related to departure or performed before going on a journey have been registered. A schoolteacher in Staryi Variash, has written:

*After praying over a loaf of bread, it is cut into pieces, eaten by the family and one piece is left for the one going away. He puts it into the bosom of his coat, rides through the village, breaks the bread into pieces and, without stopping the horse, throws it to*

*both sides of the road, saying: “miele s’iele eryshisd’os, mon s’öram eryshysa en vetele, valey no, aslym no kaptilok karele” (Eat, you gremlins, don’t come after me, don’t trouble me or my horse).* (Aptiev 1892: 119)

Similar traditions are still followed: leaving for military service, the conscript throws bread to the sides of the road or into the water when riding through the village or crossing the bridge. Everyone takes a slice of bread with him when going away.

### **Sacrifice to former home**

Until the present day, customs related to the *genii loci* of the regions inhabited by the Udmurts before settling in the Kama region are still alive. The ritual of *s’ör s’yrs* ‘the way back’ is held in every six years. A black ox is sacrificed in a place called *t’eber kyr* ‘the beautiful clearing amidst the woods’. The sickness spirits of the area where the ancestors of the Udmurts once arrived from are asked not to visit the new home and not to hurt them (Aptiev 1891: 17–18). A similar custom is still common among the Udmurts of the Kaltassinky region.

Aptiev has also described the ritual of *mör s’yrs* ‘the way of sickness’. At the annual ceremony of *vil’ tyli* ‘the new light’ a black goat is sacrificed at midnight and the sickness spirits of former home are asked not to hurt domestic animals (Aptiev 1891: 18).

## **CONCLUSION**

Considering the different types of sacrifice in the tradition of the Udmurts on the eastern bank of the river Kama, we could categorise them on the basis of their function. As shown above, food is usually sacrificed to the benevolent gods and spirits, material items to the malevolent.

The food and items sacrificed to various gods and spirits serve many other functions as well. However, in this article they have been described from the perspective of their purpose as sacrificial elements.

## Comments by Aado Lintrop

1 Both the Udmurts and the researchers of their religion have translated the words *vös'* and *vös'as'kon* marking the sacrificial rituals into Russian as *moleniye* – ‘the prayer’. Sacrifice is very closely connected with praying: before offering food or drink, or an animal, they turn to gods in prayer. Prayers are uttered when entering and leaving the sacrificial place or the sacred grove. We might even say that sacrifice is the core of the prayer, but this core is surrounded by prayers.

2 literally: ‘the leaf bread’.

3 It is not certain whether the tradition concerning swans is common. All researchers tend to quote the same account by Ostrovski. Still, swan worship has also been described by N. Afanasev.

4 The term *mer* (cf. Russian *mir*) denoted village community, as an adjective ‘collective, communal’, while *el* marked ‘area, land, community’; *byddz'ym* – ‘big’.

5 *gerber* – a ceremony following the spring sowing; coincides with St. Peter’s Day (July 12 in the new calendar).

6 *busy vvs'* – literally: ‘a field prayer’. Vladykin (1994: 239) has described several reports concerning the ceremony: a) the same as *gershyd* (held after finishing the spring farm works), b) the collective ceremony in the village after spring sowing, c) the ritual a week before Pentecost, d) a ceremony during Pentecost.

7 According to Vereshchagin, the Udmurts living in the current Sharkani region celebrated a ceremony similarly called on Christmas Day (Vereshchagin 1995: 63), Vladykin claims the holiday was called *tolsur* ‘the winter beer’ (Vladykin 1994: 226). This day marked the beginning period of the winter solstice and the Christmas *vozho dyr*. The Udmurts of the Glazov county called it *vozho shyd s'ion* – ‘the eating of the *vozho* soup’ (Pervukhin 1888: 125, 135)

8 According to Pervukhin, the Udmurts of the Glazov county celebrated this holiday on Pentecost (Pervukhin 1888: 65).

9 The name of the spirit of the tribe and family, *vorshud*, comes from *vordyny* ‘to raise, keep, entail’ and *shud* ‘luck’.

10 The relationship between the house spirit *korka kuz’o/vyzhul kuz’o/jurt kuz’o* and the earth spirit *mu-kylèini* lies in the similarity of sacrificial rituals – the sacrifices for the house spirit are often placed in a hole dug in the earth as a well.

11 During the prayer cycle *gershyd* in Varklet-Bodya, still celebrated today, only the villagers can participate in the rituals and eat the sacrificial food. On other ritual days, the selective participation does not apply.

12 The term *gulbesh taka* marks the offerings made to the house spirit. Vereshchagin for example mentions the same ritual as *gulbeshe taka vös’an* – the sacrifice of a ram in the basement (Vereshchagin 1995: 70). U. Harva also calls the sacrifice *gulbesh taka* (Holmberg 1914: 146). In Bashkiria, it has become a synonym to the house spirit.

13 Reference to the part of the grove separated from the rest and considered most sacred, so that in some regions only the grove priest and his assistants were allowed to enter. The Udmurt words *lud* ‘field’, in compound words also ‘wild’, for example, *lud pars’* – ‘wild boar’ or *keremet* (a loan from the Volga-Bulgarian times, cf. Turkish *keramet* ‘miracle’, *kerem* ‘noble’, ‘generous’, ‘high-minded’) usually stand for the worship place, separated by a fence. Only men are allowed to enter. Within the fence, there is another one separating the most sacred part of the grove. See Lintrop 1993: 50.

14 For us it sounds rather awkward, but the Udmurts consider it sufficient when explaining the reason for sacrificing those birds only to the dead.

15 In some regions (Varklet-Bodya, for example) *kujas’kon* denotes the commemoration of the dead in other places besides the cemetery as well.

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