

## **Liminal Periods in the Udmurt Ritual Year**

In our cultural space we usually imagine our lifetime as a journey. Wayfarer or pilgrim is common metaphor for us as travellers on the road of life. We have several stages or parts on our way and many mental milestones and turns for marking and separating them. Actually we can say that linear time of human life is also structured by the cyclic rhythms of year and day. These contain for us periods of different significance.

### **Holy periods**

There are interim periods during a person's lifetime as well as during the calendar year, which are characterised by a state of indefiniteness or being without borders due to lack of everyday boundaries. The times are open to both good and evil and are close to the supernatural. Mental boundaries and landmarks are part of our system of orientation. Without them, space would be homogeneous; there would be no difference between familiar and unfamiliar, good and evil, sacred and profane places. It is the same with time. The expressions good times, hard times, crazy times, fast times, holiday time, everyday time, childhood, youth, manhood etc. contain obvious judgements and defining of limits. Transitions from one time, one period of life, one status to another are kind of crossroads or fork in the road in time. As we well know from the mythologies of different peoples, crossroads are liminal places in space where homeless or restless spirits gather and miscellaneous magic will be done (Puhvel 1989). If liminality causes ordinary orientation to be unable to function, then usual behaviour will also turn out to be ineffective or unsuitable. Specific times require specific behaviour. This is why throughout the ages people have carried out practices related to

various periods of time and various conditions of liminality which analytically are called rites of passage.

## **Liminal time in the Udmurt popular calendar**

There are two main liminal periods in the Udmurt<sup>1</sup> folk calendar – the period after winter solstice is called *vozhodyr* (time of the *vozho*) or *uivozho* (night+*vozho*), and the period after summer solstice *invozhodir* (time of the heavenly *vozho*) or *vozho poton tolez'* (month of *vozho* emerging).

The semantic field of the Old Permian word *vezha* enabled its use as an equivalent for the Christian concept 'holy/sacred': *ien vezha lov* – Holy Spirit, *vezha kuima* – Holy Trinity, *vezha lun* – holy day (Sunday) (Lytkin 1952: 156). In Modern Komi<sup>2</sup> language *vezh* also stands for 'holy/sacred', but also for 'cross': *vezha va* – holy water, *vezhai* – godfather (holy/cross father), *vezhan'* – godmother. *Vezhadyr* is yuletide (Russian *sviatki*), but the Komi-Zyrian *vezha* also means 'filthy/impure' and 'the Devil' (Gribova 1975: 110). The verb *vezhny* stands for 'exchange', *vezhöm* was the child exchanged by the Devil or evil spirit in the Komi mythology. In the Udmurt language *vozho* does not directly mean 'holy' – this particular meaning becomes evident in connection with yuletide, called *vozhodyr* among the Udmurts, as well as the Komi. The Udmurts have a different name for its summer counterpart – *invozhodyr* – (sky + *vozho* + time/tide). The *vozhos* are also demonic spirits related to the water spirit (look Lintrop 2004: 8 – 11).

It is likely that the Permian *vezha* or *vozho* is originated in Finno-Ugric root associated with liminality, or existing somewhere in-between: \**vajesh* > Early Permian *vezh-* > Udm. *vozh* 'crossroad, river mouth, either of two warps, the crossing of warps and woofs,

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<sup>1</sup> Udmurts (in older literature Votyaks) are Finno-Ugric people of Permian language group (Uralo-Altai Family, Uralic languages, Finno-Ugric branch, Permian group). Their number in 2002 was 636 935. Most of them are living in Udmurt Republic of the Russian Federation; smaller groups are settled in Tatarian Republic, Bashkortostan, and Kirov Region.

<sup>2</sup> Finno-Ugric language, together with the Udmurt language it enters into Permian language group.



Gyia, Lyp and Polom parishes the period of *vozho* was associated with the blooming of rye.<sup>3</sup> Soiling water during this period was considered a grave sin - therefore it was forbidden to swim, wash the laundry or the dishes (even near a well), and even drive the herd into the river. The restrictions had to be followed especially around noon, when people tried to make no loud noises.” (Pervukhin 1888, 1:59-60).

Finnish researcher Uno Holmberg notes that violating the restriction caused suffering for the whole community, either in the form of storm or hail storm (Holmberg 1914: 174). Women in the village of Kuzebaev (Southern Udmurtia) have told the author that during the summer *invozh*o-period it was forbidden to work with wool or hemp and it was also forbidden to mow and pick flowers. In Kuzebaev this period ended on St. Peter’s Day (July 12<sup>th</sup>) with sacrificing ceremonies in great prayer house (*byd’z’ym kual*a) and holy grove (*lud*). On next day the haymaking time begins. The *invozh*o-period was often associated with the blooming of red catchfly or red campion (*invozh*o *s’as’ka*). In June 2003 some people of Varklet-Bodia village told: “*vös’*, *pe*, *voz’ vyle pote invozh*o *dyria*” – there is saying that during *invozh*o period faith<sup>4</sup> walks on the meadows.

In our context significant observation is made by the Udmurt folklorist Irina Nurieva that unlike spring or autumn calendar festivities the acoustic code of summer and winter liminal times feasts excludes loud ritual singing (Nurieva 2004: 74).

The winter *vozho*-time was the main story-telling and riddle time for the Udmurts (Shkلياev 1989: 36). Even as late as in June 2002 three informants, living in the Udmurtskii-Karaul and Deby villages in the Krasnogorskoie region (Northern Udmurtia), claimed that the words for ‘riddle’ in local dialect are *vozho kyl* (*vozho* language/word/story) or *vozho mad’* (*vozho* speech/word/story)<sup>5</sup>. Even though N. Pervukhin assumed that the word *vozho mad’* may be interpreted as “the story of the winter *vozho* period” (Pervukhin 1888,

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<sup>3</sup> The motif of water sprites walking in the fields during the blooming of rye is also known in Russian folklore (Krinichnaia 1994: 23).

<sup>4</sup> *Vös’* means in the Udmurt language not only faith or religion, but also prayer, sacrifice.

<sup>5</sup> The ethnic genre name for riddles, *vozho mad’*, is mentioned in Gavrilov 1880: 54, Pervukhin 1888, 3: 70); Wichmann (1901: 6-7). Pervukhin has used the same word for folk tale. The more common modern term for riddle is *mad’is’kon kyl* or *mad’kyl*.

3:70), and Tat'ana Vladykina seems to agree (Vladykina 1988: 11), this interpretation does not seem justified. On the one hand the word *vozho mad'* referred to the traditional, ancestral nature of the text (cf. *vyzhykyl*: fairy tale, legend - root/gender/tribe/generation + language /word/story), on the other hand the word may have indicated the existence of a special style for communicating with visitors at solstices, the artistic style of folk tales and riddles. There was direct restriction for riddle after the winter *vozho*-time: "*iö vyle sulton bere madis'kyny ug iara: pudo vera kare*" - riddling is forbidden after the Epiphany of Jesus<sup>6</sup>: cow's udder fills with milk [before calve] (Vladykina 1988: 73).

### Visitors of the liminal period

The Udmurts of the Glazov County (Northern Udmurtia) believed even in the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century that water spirits came into the villages and inhabited the saunas before Christmas. In the twilight they could be encountered on the street: "During the summer *vozho dyr* it sleeps, but on winter solstice (before Christmas) it leaves the water and spends most of its time in saunas, though it could be met on the street. This is why no Votyak dares to walk alone on the streets without a burnt chip during Christmas." (Pervukhin 1888, 1: 75).

The water spirits of the Christmas period were mostly called the *vozhos*. Pervukhin continues: "From December 25<sup>th</sup> to January 6<sup>th</sup> small (no longer than a few archines tall), colourful, though relatively similar-looking devils (with tails and horns) walk on the streets of villages, settlements, even the town of Glazov. The Russians call them *kulish*, the Votyaks *vozho*. Like water spirits, the *vozho* fear even the smallest piece of burnt chip. [---] Those, who walk around without a chip, will be tripped up by the *vozho*. [---] for the same purpose they turn into a post, or a corner of a house... They may take a man to his neighbour's house instead of his own, and may make a woman drive other people's cattle to her own yard..." (Pervukhin 1888, 1: 99-100).

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<sup>6</sup> January 19, a feast day called *vozho kel'an* 'the sending off, or the departure of *vozho*' or *iö vylın sylon/sulton* 'standing on ice'.

For the Udmurts, *vozhodyr* is the period for mumming. The most common name for mumming is *pörtmas'kon*, cf. *pörtmany* – ‘to change, to transform, to slander’. Other words for mumming are *pendzas'kon* (cf. *pen* ‘soot, ashes’, *pendzyny* ‘incinerate, to burn to ashes’, referring to the most common way of masking by smearing the face with soot or ashes), *vozhoias'kon* (“*vozhoin*”); in several regions the mummers called themselves the *vozho*) and *chokmorskön*. The latter derives from the word *chokmor* – wooden club (cf. Russian *chekmar* ‘wooden club, beater’ < *cheka* ‘wedge, pole’) and refers to the banging of house corners and floors with sticks and clubs, a characteristic activity for the mummers, which helped to repel evil spirits and diseases from the house and the village (Vladykin 1994: 227). The Udmurt Christmas mummers almost seem to have split personalities: the fact that they wore clothes inside out, had faces smeared with soot, men were wearing women’s clothes and women were wearing men’s clothes, indicate that they were visitors from the otherworld (where, according to the universal belief, things are the reverse to this world). The fact that they were believed to bring luck in herding relates them to the souls of ancestors, who were universally considered the primary bringers of herding luck in many cultures. And, last but not least, the mummers were addressed to as the *vozho*, which were undoubtedly related to dead ancestors (Pl.26).

The Udmurt Christmas mummers also functioned as repellers of evil forces. Modern Udmurt ethnologist Vladimir Vladykin mentions an account, describing how mummers ran along village streets, screaming loudly, banging against the corners of houses, and on the floors inside the houses, frightening the sauna spirits (*munchokuz'oos* Vladykin 1994: 226–22), though according to a fairly commonly held belief the *vozhos* inhabited the saunas. As I have indicated before, no clear distinction was made between the sauna fairies and the *vozhos*. The exorcistic function of the Udmurt Christmas mummers very likely originates in the traditions associated with the end of the solstitial period.

The winter *vozho*-period ended on January 19<sup>7</sup> (or the Epiphany of Jesus according to the Orthodox calendar) with a feast day called *vozho kel'an* ‘the sending off, or the departure of *vozho*’ or *iö vylın*

<sup>7</sup> January 6 by the old stile.

*sylon* ‘standing on ice’. On the night before January 6 the youth of the village walked from sauna to sauna, singing songs and “listened to their fate” and told the *vozho*: “*pot tatys’ mil’emesty-les’!*” (‘Leave us!’). The next morning all the men went to the river and banged on the ice with their axes and clubs, shouting: “*koshki tattys’!*” (‘Leave this place!’ Pervukhin 1888, 2: 105-106). In some Besermian<sup>8</sup> villages during the send-off *vozhos* were called back in summer for bringing good crop (Popova 2004, 1: 126).

### Symmetry of liminality in the Udmurt popular calendar

In the mythologies of Permian and Ob-Ugrian peoples the communication between our world and underworld takes place mostly by river. Moving downstream has also the meaning of going towards the underworld and vice versa. Mansis<sup>9</sup> named the soul component that left human being after the death and went to the land of the dead *longhal’ mine is* – the soul going downstream. Water spirits were often demonized and connected with the underworld (cf. Mansi *vitkas* ‘water spirit’, Komi *kul’* ‘devil’, *vasa* ‘water spirit’, *vakul’* ‘water devil’). In the Udmurt mythological geography downstream also means towards the land of the dead. So we can draw conclusion that winter liminal period *vozhodyr* was clearly connected with dead ancestors and evil spirits of the underworld, who were most active at nighttime (cf. *uivozho* - *nightvozho*). Most critical time of the day was midnight.

Summer liminal period was vice versa related to heaven. Restrictions connected with *invozho dyr* had to be followed especially around noon, when people tried to make no loud noises. In some places *invozho* was regarded as midday spirit. In Komi mythology *vezhadyr* is connected with the spirit named *pölödnica* – possibly connected with the Russian creature *poludnica* (midday spirit) – who lived or walked on rye field and was most active during the blooming time of rye (Holmberg 1914: 175). It is very interesting

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<sup>8</sup> Besermians – ethnic group in Northern Udmurtia. Besserman language is actually a dialect of Udmurt language, but their culture (especially the material one) is quite different.

<sup>9</sup> Finno-Ugric people in West Siberia.

that in Russian mythology *poludnica* –woman in white – forces human being to compete with her in riddling, and tickles the loser to death. As we mentioned before one of the ethnic genre names for riddles is *vozho kyl* or *vozho mad'* (*vozho* language/word or speech/story). We also mentioned the saying that during *invozho* period faith walks on the meadows. There existed also belief that one of the main Udmurt deities, *kyl dys'in* himself walked between rye fields and protected the ripening crop, but often the guardian spirit of crop fields had name *mezha ut'is'* – protector of headlands. Unlike to Russian *poludnica mezha ut'is'* reveals himself as man in white. We have to mention here that Slavonic *poludnica, polednice* is very close to water spirit. In Polesie (region partly in Belarus, Ukraine, Poland and Russia) one of the names for the water spirit was *poludenik* – midday spirit (Levkievskaja 1995: 339).

Here we have to remember that mythical world river connects all three worlds. So upstream also means towards the upper world, towards the dwellings of Gods, and supernatural beings connected with water may sometimes be messengers descending to the land of men.

In some opinions summer liminal time *invozho dyr* lasted till August 14<sup>th</sup> (August 1<sup>st</sup> by the old stile), and ended with the festivities named *vu vylyn sylon* (standing on water, cf. standing on ice after winter liminal period). In Besermian village Iunda was recorded next information: “Then *vozho* is sent in the water. It happens in summer. In such a day people do swim last time. Pope submerges cross under the water. *Vozho* was already leaving.” (Popova 2004, 2: 113). During summer *vozhodyr* Besermians had similar restrictions as Udmurts: “In summer also was *vozho*. It was forbidden to launder at daytime. Washing was permitted only early morning or late evening. They were afraid that hail will beat their crop.” For taking water from river or spring only wooden or bark vessels were used (Popova 2004, 2: 114).

## Final comments

On the example of the Udmurt material we can see that there are two symmetrical liminal periods in the Udmurt folk calendar. Both their names are etymologically derived from the word associated with



liminality, existing somewhere in-between. These periods differ considerably from spring and autumn equinoctial times – there is remarkable connection with water, interdict from doing noise etc. Spring festivity *akashka* is characterized by loud ritual singing, horseback riding and swinging. In some places they contain initiation rites - prayers by the boys and girls reaching full maturity. Autumn festivities *siz'yl iuon* and/or *pukro* are also accompanied by loud singing and making noise during dancing. Spring and autumn equinoctial times were not expanded into long periods, but marked with concrete festivities. They were starting points for summer and winter halves of year. Liminal times were conversely long sacred periods with strong restrictions. It is probable that summer liminal period was originally dedicated to the heaven (upper world) and winter liminal period to the underworld (land of the dead). It was quite usual belief that after the winter *vozho*-period all *vozhos* went downstream.

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