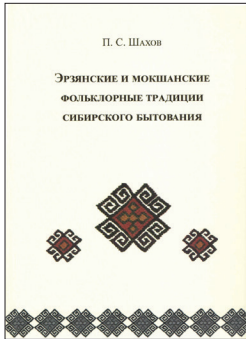


# BOOK REVIEW

## SIBERIAN MORDVIN FOLKLORE TRADITIONS



**Pavel S. Shakhov. *Erzianskie i mokshanskije fol'klornye traditsii sibirskogo bytovaniia*. Novosibirsk: Akademizdat-sentr RAN, 2020. 388 pp. In Russian.**

In recent years, there has been an increase in the studies of traditional settler cultures in Siberia, particularly those carried out by researchers from Novosibirsk, both due to Novosibirsk's geographical closeness to native Siberian settlements and the work done by ethnic music researchers from the Novosibirsk State Conservatory. P. S. Shakhov's monograph *Erzianskie i mokshanskije fol'klornye traditsii sibirskogo bytovaniia* (Erzya

and Moksha Folklore Traditions in Siberia: Weddings, Calendar, Round Dance Songs) on Siberian Mordvin folklore is an interesting new study done in this particular field.

Moksha Mordvins and Erzya Mordvins live dispersedly, and a major part of their population (around 66,000 people) reside in Siberia. Unlike the 'mainland' tradition described extensively in the works by T. M. Ananicheva, N. I. Boyarkin, L. B. Boyarkina, L. N. Shamova, and others, Siberian Mordvin musical folklore remained understudied for a long time, and only in the 1970s–1980s the first audio recordings were made. To this day, only some of these materials are widely available. Currently, organized accumulation and description of Siberian Mordvin musical folklore is carried out by P. S. Shakhov and his colleagues from the Novosibirsk State Conservatory; research trips are taken on a regular basis (starting in 2007). The great significance of this research is determined by the fact that traditional rituals are gradually fading away, audio and video records of authentic folklore remain unavailable, and the Mordvins themselves are actively striving to resurrect their native culture.

P. S. Shakhov's monograph is the first major work in ethnic music studies dedicated to Mordvin settler folklore in Siberia. He offers a profound analysis of Siberian Mordvin wedding rites, folk calendar, and round dance songs. Each folklore system is described in one of the three chapters of the book. I shall now review each of them.

In the first chapter, Shakhov analyzes the Siberian Mordvin weddings from the ritual-ethnographic and musical-folkloristic points of view. Using various records, he describes two local variations of Erzya weddings: the Altai one and the Kemerovo one. Shakhov employs the structural-typological method to define the genre composition of the Erzya weddings and to determine the musical styles of lamentations and ritual songs. In this chapter, he offers a detailed description of various stages of traditional

weddings and their musical elements, namely songs, lamentations, ditties, and prayers. He shows that the Altai variant and the Kemerovo variant are similar; on the other hand, the Siberian variations of the Mordvin weddings and the 'mainland' ones differ significantly in rites related to the groom's place. Shakhov defines the Siberian Erzya wedding type as the song type with a prominent communicative function.

Shakhov's description of the Moksha wedding, which is not as fully preserved as the Erzya one, is essentially a reconstruction based on available materials, including those collected by Shakhov himself. The Altai-based Moksha wedding involves two ritual phases caused by the bride's move to the groom's house after the engagement and once again on the wedding day. Shakhov's study shows the importance of erotic symbolism, the use of profanities, as well as a large number of rebuking songs and obscene ditties. Musically, Moksha weddings differ from Erzya weddings as well. Two Moksha polytextual melodies are shown to be related to two types of ritual transition (territorial and initiatory).

Shakhov also compares the Siberian Erzya variations of weddings with traditional weddings in the Bolshebereznykovsky District (Republic of Mordovia), Buinsky County of the Simbirsk Province (now known as the Ibresinsky District, Chuvash Republic), and the Klyavlin'sky District of the Kuybyshev (now Samara) Oblast.

In the second chapter, we find a description of the Siberian Mordvin folk calendar based on extensive oral folklore materials. Shakhov analyzes various rituals of the winter-spring and summer-fall cycles at least partially related to the Eastern Orthodox church calendar. By comparing the publicly available materials and his own records, Shakhov concludes that calendar folklore is primarily represented by Christmas and Koliada carols, Shrovetide songs, spring 'fasting' songs with erotic motifs (*Pozyara!*), Russian round dance songs and lyrical songs, Eastern Orthodox troparia, spell songs, and various verbal formulae. Shakhov analyzes the musical styles of calendar songs and distinguishes their typical rhythmic and melodic structures, types of lyrics and intonation. He shows that Siberian Mordvin musical folklore is generally similar to 'mainland' tradition in its ethnographic, musical, and folklore aspects.

The third chapter is dedicated to round dance songs analyzed in the context of the autochthonous musical-ethnographic traditions. Here, Shakhov describes the round dance songs recorded in Siberian Mordvin communities and studies the 'walking' and 'dancing' types of these songs. He shows that hybrid types of round dance songs are typical both for the Siberian Mordvin tradition and the 'mainland' one, characterized by their borrowed melodies and syllable-rhythmic formulae, as well as two-part verse structures with contrasting opening parts and refrains.

I shall now summarize Shakhov's main conclusions. The uniqueness of each Siberian Mordvin sub-ethnic group is represented particularly strongly by wedding rituals. Calendar and seasonal folklore-ethnographic systems are generally similar in Erzya and Moksha cultures. Siberian Mordvin round dance songs preserve the typological traits of the autochthonous tradition.

Shakhov's monograph comprises 33.8 printer sheets, more than half of which is taken up by appendixes including lyrics, translations, notations, photographs, tables, and diagrams with the results of Shakhov's analysis. For music researchers, notations are particularly valuable. These include 81 samples with commentary recorded by P. S. Shakhov, and 24 samples by M. A. Lobanov (2008), 105 samples in total. Such a number of samples may be considered representative enough for a disappearing tradition. Notations, transcribed folklore texts, oral stories of festivals, rituals, and everyday life, and photographs serve as highly important documents recording the native Siberian Mordvin culture.

Footnotes containing transcriptions of informant commentary, Shakhov's own commentary on ethnography and folklore, and parallels found in 'mainland' sources further contribute to the monograph's informational denseness. Footnotes explain and deepen the main text. Shakhov's profound understanding of Mordvin ethnography and folklore and great interest in Mordvin culture ensure that he is trusted and respected by Mordvins themselves, enough for them to share their culturally significant knowledge.

I must also add that this monograph is a successful experiment in describing Siberian settler culture, which may be useful for further research of other cultures. To this day, many folklore systems of Siberian re-settler nations remain understudied, including several Finno-Ugric ones (Udmurts, Mari, Karelians, Finns, Komi-Zyryans, Estonians, Veps).

One may see certain similarities between Mordvin rituals and the culture of the indigenous Siberian Finno-Ugric peoples. Birchbark masks, 'horse cakes', the rite of seeing the relatives out with burning brooms, the counting of ditties with marks on the ceiling resemble the Khanty and Mansi Bear-Feast. During this ritual, actors put on birchbark masks and bake deer-shaped bread for symbolic sacrifice; at the end of the festival, a 'fox' with a tail made of burning straw scares the bear away, and each song, performance or dance is marked on a special counting stick. This proves the archaic nature of acts included in various rituals.

This monograph may be of interest to ethnic music researchers, ethnographers, and philologists; it may also be used in comparative studies. I also believe that such a profound and reliable source of materials on Siberian Mordvin folklore, ethnography, and music will attract the interest of the Siberian Mordvin diaspora and assist the resurrection of Siberian Mordvin folk traditions.

It is regrettable that Shakhov's monograph does not include an audio appendix similar to those commonly found in major folklore studies. However, certain materials, including audio records and photographs, may be found in the electronic resource titled *Mordovskie fol'klorno-etnograficheskie traditsii sibirskogo bytovaniia* (Siberian Mordvin Folklore and Ethnographic Traditions) (see <https://www.philology.nsc.ru/resources/mordva.php>), via the QR code offered at the back of the title page.

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