Introduction

In whatever culture, traditional or contemporary, rituals represent a significant part of what the culture-bearers see as self-evident. Spontaneously, we would not even use the word 'ritual' for events like birthday parties, the beginning of a new academic year or the beginning of a football match. Ignoring the universality of the phenomenon, we tend to use this word about traditional cultures like those that will be described in the following pages. Although, is it right to call the Udmurt culture a traditional culture?

We shall not dwell here on the complicated notion of tradition, but will just rely on the intuitively perceived notion of the 'traditional'. The Udmurt, an ethnic group living in central Russia, have agrarian traditions. Their life has been rooted in villages, with modern urban life starting to dominate their lives barely one century ago, at the beginning of the 20th century, with the advent of the Soviet era. Although the Soviet period had and has deeply ambiguous consequences, both enriching and tragic, it has undoubtedly allowed the Udmurt to enter a new period in their history. The Udmurt of today, the same Udmurt we are going to comment about, are modern people. Many of them have computers at home and communicate with friends through social media. They listen to the same songs and watch the same films as their age mates in the other parts of the world. So, on the one hand they are globalised people. But simultaneously, they have an inheritance which they carry on, they have their own way to address God and to strengthen the links within their community.

When it comes to the traditional religion, some researchers definitely look for oldtimers. Indeed, much has been lost with the Soviet taboo on investigating religion, and it is reasonable to try to fill the blanks by collecting as many memories as we are able to. But just as important is to avoid being in the same situation in 50 years, and to pay attention to what is going on today. Especially because the present is a fascinating period. After a long period of oblivion, the Eastern Udmurt are taking in hand their traditions and renewing them according to their needs. We do understand the pain of elder people, who must witness the death of the world of their childhood and youth. Indeed, we share their pain. But we are also happy to follow those who are fully engaged in building bridges between the roots and the fruits. It is these people this research is about.

We have conducted fieldwork among the so-called Eastern Udmurt, a diaspora group living in a Turkic environment east of the Kama River, a large part of which is in the Republic of Bashkortostan while the core of the Udmurt population remains in the territory of Udmurtia (the Udmurt Republic) between the Vyatka and the Kama rivers. The whole of the Eastern

Udmurt region is a particular one from the religious point of view: they have never been forced to embrace Christianity[1], and their particular form of agrarian worship is still very much alive, with more or less continuity. We shall analyse this phenomenon in one of Bashkortostan's district, where nineteen Udmurt villages form a cluster.

The encounter with the collective rituals of the Eastern Udmurt

After this brief introduction, we shall present how we came across the rituals that we have now been studying for ten years. We, the authors, have been working among the Eastern Udmurt since 2013, initially on our own initiative with the support of the University of Tartu, later within the framework of several Estonian and French projects. We rely upon data that we gathered during fieldwork in different villages of Tatyshly district, Bashkortostan. We have not ignored other villages that have collective ceremonies in other districts, but here we will keep this additional information for comparison and shall concentrate on one set of ceremonies, the annual cycle, in this cluster of nineteen neighbouring villages.

Eva Toulouze became acquainted with Tatyshly district in 2011, when she took advantage of free time after participating in a Russian-French summer school of young scientists in Ufa, Bashkortostan's capital. She visited the Udmurt Cultural Centre in Novye Tatyshly, a village that is known to the Udmurt as Vil'gurt ('new village'). The Udmurt activists who received her showed her their sacred places and told her about their sacrificial ceremonies. This awakened her interest, which was the keener for the fresh experience she had had in Udmurtia – she had witnessed there some tense, suspicious behaviour on the part of people who support traditional religious practice, which can be explained by the hostile environment the Orthodox Church has created against the animistic tradition in the region. The spontaneously natural way the people in Novye Tatyshly talked about their rituals aroused her interest, and two years later, with the acceptance of the local authorities, she was back. She arrived with two colleagues, Udmurt ethnographer and specialist in Udmurt religion Ranus Sadikov, with whom most people in the region were already acquainted because he had worked in the region for a long time; and the co-author of this book, Estonian visual anthropologist and filmmaker Liivo Niglas. A filmmaker's presence was a must, as we were aware that the visual dimension would be

[1] Although some individuals, for different reasons, have converted.

crucial in documenting practices that had not been documented and which only a few people outside of the region knew about.

The first year allowed us the discovery of the field. Our small team found lodgings in the small village of Malaya Bal'zyuga, and we started our work by becoming acquainted with the local sacrificial priests. Actually, our choice of village was justified: not only was the acting sacrificial priest an exceptionally young man, 30-year-old Fridman Kabip'anov, but it was the place where his predecessor lived, elder sacrificial priest Nazip Sadriev, an authority on religious matters across all of the Udmurt territory.

We stayed for one month in the village and merged into its social life. We discovered the geography of the area, other villages, the local authorities and many villagers, among whom those who visited our landlady regularly brought information directly to us at home. At the same time, they were interested in understanding who we were, for foreigners were seldom seen in the village. A shift in calendar habits did not allow us to attend ceremonies at the village level, for they had already been performed when we arrived at the beginning of June. But we were in time for two bigger ceremonies encompassing several villages. Our attendance and filming gave us the opportunity to become acquainted with several active sacrificial priests and their helpers: we never attended a ceremony without having met the priests beforehand and obtaining their permission. We must recognise that never, neither in the Tatyshly district nor elsewhere, did we meet a refusal. On the contrary, we were always received with the utmost friendliness. If some of our partners had reservations or objections, they never expressed them to us directly. Thus we had the opportunity to notice several differences between the ritual practices of different locations. Moreover, we attended a ceremony that covered the whole Eastern Udmurt region at the end of the month.

We went back to the field six months later for the winter ceremonies and attended two of them. We were on our own, for Ranus had health problems that did not allow him to go to the field for one-and-a-half years. We already had some contacts, lodgings we were welcome in and the trust of the people responsible for the ceremonies. We found an interpreter, a doctoral student at the University of Tartu, Anna Baydullina, who was writing up her PhD at home in an Udmurt village.

Next year, in 2013, our team was increased with the presence of Estonian anthropologist of religion Laur Vallikivi, who later joined our fieldwork on three occasions. We were finally able to attend the ceremonies at the village level, even two of them. This was indeed illuminating. While that very year Udmurt civil servants started talking of the standardisation of Udmurt

rituals (FWM 2014[2]), we would witness the extraordinary diversity of them, even among very close villages. We understood that documentation had to tackle this question. Considering the powerful influence of film, we understood that we had to document all the village ceremonies, for each village had the right to see its traditions, its way of doing things, documented, and by failing to do so standardisation could very well start with the documented ceremonies, ignoring those not documented. Thus, for ethical reasons, our programme was established to run for several years.

In the next year, 2015, Ranus Sadikov was back, but Liivo Niglas, who was filming a documentary in the USA, could not join us. So only Eva and Ranus were in the field visiting several new villages, some in other districts. We had then a new experience of cooperation with Udmurt television, which sent at our request and with the financial support of Tartu University, a cameraman to film a village ceremony, which confirmed the local peculiarities of the ceremonies.

2016 was a turning point in our fieldwork, for that year we were joined by Nikolai Anisimov, a young Udmurt folklorist fluent in his mother tongue, preparing his PhD in Tartu University, whose presence significantly broadened our field of study. Anisimov's presence was material from two points of view. Firstly, he opened the field of song to us. Song is a central mode of expression in Udmurt communication. We had no contact whatsoever with song in the first years, probably because Ranus was not interested in singing culture and did not sing himself. But Nikolai not only is a famous performer of Udmurt folk and stage songs, well-known in all the Udmurt area, he also has a huge repertoire of folk songs from different local cultures. His mere appearance in homesteads prompted singing. The filling of this huge gap in the understanding of contemporary Eastern Udmurt culture was most enriching. Secondly, Nikolai's fieldwork techniques and his status allowed communication to flow much more easily and deeply: everybody was honoured to have him visiting. We were received indeed as guests, with all the traditional rituals of hospitality.

Since 2017, we have been financed by a French State grant[3] in addition to Estonian grants, and every year, sometimes twice a year or more, groups of scholars attended the field and conducted fieldwork in the Eastern Udmurt area. People expect us. The year 2020 and some part of 2021, with

[2] Recorded from Salim Garifullin, b. 1950 in Nizhnebaltachevo, by Eva Toulouze 2014.

[3] IUF 2017–2022 "Étude interdisciplinaire d'une minorité animiste en Russie d'Europe, les Oudmourtes orientaux: rituels, coutumes, engagement communautaire aujourd'hui" (2018–2022) Interdisciplinary study of an animist minority in Russia, the Eastern Udmurt: rituals, customs, and community involvement today".

the COVID-19 restrictions, did not allow for fieldwork and the villagers expressed their surprise that we were not there, as they have become accustomed to us visiting.

Finally, since 2016, we have been invited to several other kinds of more intimate ritual. We have now many friends and acquaintances in the field, and the people are interested in having us document their family rituals, which we are happy to do, both for the sake of science and for their family archives. However, these rituals are not the aim of this book: here we shall stick to collective prayer ceremonies, the most original feature in Eastern Udmurt religious practice.

Traditional collective ceremonies of the Udmurt in general and the Eastern Udmurt in particular

Before Christianisation, Udmurts regularly held ceremonies that included the population of whole villages and groups of villages. Even after Evangelisation was achieved, we have evidence – both from archive materials and from early researchers, who left even photographs of such huge ceremonies – that initially the practice was not totally discontinued (Wichmann I 1987; Sadikov & Mäkelä 2009; Harva 1914). Of course, evangelisation came early in the core Udmurt territory: it started in the 16th century, with the defeat of the khanate of Kazan by the Muscovite armies in 1552, and the absorption of the khanate's territory in what was becoming the Russian Empire. It continued in the subsequent centuries, with a peak in the 18th century – the thirty years preceding the acceptation of religious freedom in the Russia Empire, i.e. before the prohibition of forceful conversion when the Office for Neophytes was established in 1740 (Kappeler 1982: 277; Brennan 1987: 128–129; Luppov 1999 [1899]: 148). But what was done could not be undone. Until 1905[4], apostasy from Orthodoxy was a crime[5], so despite many attempts (mainly by Mari, a Finno-Ugric group living west of Udmurtia, who wanted their old spirituality back) there was no way out of the Christianity they had been coerced into and they became accustomed to it. Therefore, at the end of the 19th century, when ethnographers started to use photography in fieldwork, no more big ceremonies were held in core Udmurt territory as it was wholly encompassed by Christianity. However,

[4] In 1905 a new law was adopted allowing apostasy (McCarthy 1973: 308).

[5] See Nilüfer Kefeli 2014: 23–24.