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.

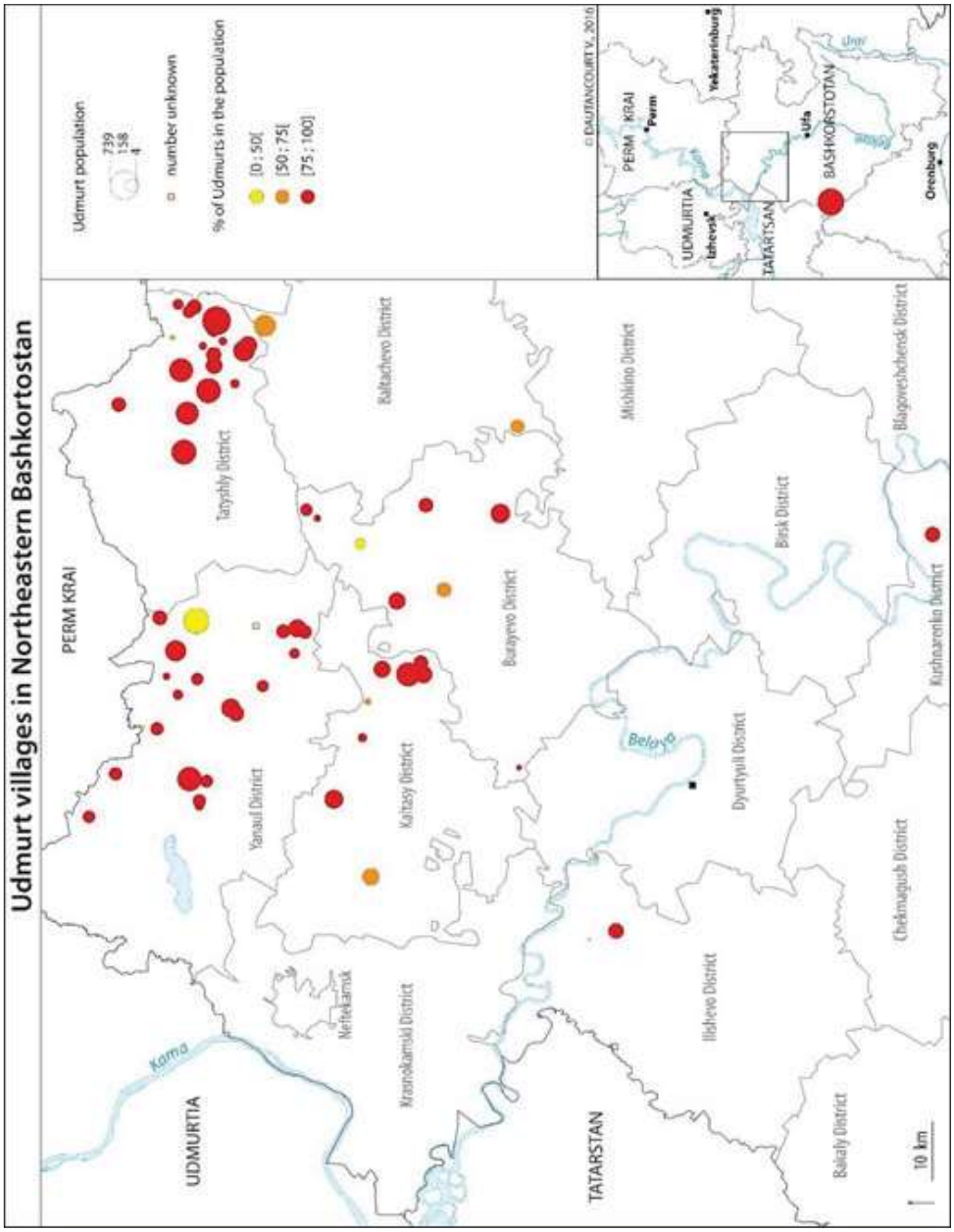
they continued elsewhere, and the photographs we have are from these other areas. Indeed, in other territories traditional Udmurt practices did not die.

Those Udmurt communities that did not want to accept the new rule fled. They found sanctuary in the surrounding Muslim areas (Toulouze & Anisimov 2020; Kappeler 1994: 41; Luppov 1999 [1899]: 141–142). These areas were scarcely inhabited, and the local population, Tatars and Bashkir, were partly nomadic. The Muslims accepted the newcomers and the Udmurt were allowed to settle and keep their customs, but were asked to pay tax and rent on the land. Later, they bought the land as their own. Although Islam is also a proselytising religion, and there were attempts to get the new population to embrace Islam, the situation was entirely different from forced Christianisation by Russians. The attempts at conversion were not supported by the power of secular authorities, rather they relied on the beliefs and trust of the local population. They were partly successful, and several villages during the 19th century and especially at its end decided to turn collectively towards "the Tatar faith" (Sadikov 2019). But most of the Udmurt communities kept aloof and retained the traditions they had migrated to maintain.

This explains why the photos we have of massive ceremonies at the end of the 19th century come from the region beyond the Kama River, where the Udmurt had retained their traditional rituals. Some scholars, particularly Finns, left extremely valuable information about these rituals, both in writing and in photographs (Sadikov & Mäkelä 2009). These allow us to visualise the configuration of sacred places, the behaviour of the population, the clothes they wore. They are precious data *per se*, but they are also extremely useful from a comparative perspective.

In the 20th century, the Udmurt religion has revealed its resilience. During the Soviet period, religion in general was under siege. The State rejected it and banned it from social life. Religious practice was not directly prohibited, but was not well accepted, and sacrifices of big animals (cows, horses) were seen as violations of state property. The pressure from the State and its institutions was overwhelming everywhere, although the Eastern Udmurt somehow received less severe treatment. Probably this is because of the agrarian environment they lived in, wherefore the Party was less interested and less involved in repressing ideologically 'incorrect' behaviours.

On the one hand, religious practice found expression within the official rule, as with for example fertility ceremonies performed at collective farm. On the other hand, strong and obstinate sacrificial priests challenged the Communist Party and went on holding their ceremonies in discreet locations. Of course, as everywhere, the young were exposed to State ideology through school and the army, and were not able to join the elders in ceremonies that were held during working hours, which were attended by only


Udmurt villages in Northeastern Bashkortostan
Udmurt population
739
158
4
number unknown
% of Udmurts in the population
[0 ; 50[
[50 ; 75[
[75 ; 100]
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PERM KRAI
Perm
UDMURTIA
Izhevsk
TATARSTAN
Ufa
BASHKORTOSTAN
Yekaterinburg
Ural
Orenburg
PERM KRAI
UDMURTIA
TATARSTAN
BASHKORTOSTAN
Tanypsky District
Yanaul District
Neftekamsk
Krasnokamski District
Kamsk
Kaltasy District
Baltachevo District
Buzayevo District
Mishkino District
Beloy
Ilishevo District
Dyurtyuli District
Bizsk District
Blagoveshchensk District
Kushnarenkio District
Chekmagush District
Baliaty District
10 km

retired villagers. But repressions never became so drastic that they totally discouraged religious practice.

Thus, in the areas beyond the Kama (see map below), inhabited by the Eastern Udmurt, in some places collective ceremonies survived for the whole of the hostile 20th century. In other places, they have disappeared at different historical moments. The reasons for preservation and disappearance are diverse, but the main one is ultimately the degree of involvement of the people concerned (Toulouze & Vallikivi 2021).

The main character in such ceremonies is, first, the sacrificial priest, the person responsible for conducting the ceremonies. In places where the personality of the sacrificial priest was strong and deliberate, the tradition remained and was transmitted. It required a powerful personal involvement, and courage as the pressure from the communist authorities was insistent. In the places where these ceremonies have never been discontinued, we find such sacrificial priests. But it is not the only condition for maintenance. It is probably not by chance that the main place where ceremonies did not experience interruptions is the Tatyshly district of Bashkortostan. This district has three characteristics that could encourage the preservation of tradition. Firstly, there are 19 Udmurt villages forming a cluster so there is an ethnically homogeneous Udmurt zone in which Udmurt is the main communication language and has not, as yet, been replaced by any other. Secondly, the main population around the Udmurt cluster is a Turkic one. If we rely on Russian language sources, the main population is Tatar. If we listen to Udmurt speech, it is composed of "Bashkyrt", which is the general word used for the Turkic population (Atamanov 2020: 132). If we look at census information, the population is mainly Bashkir. We choose the neutral expression Turkic because we do not wish to interfere in a polemic for which our fieldwork has not prepared us. To sum up its terms, we must take into account that the population of Bashkortostan is, according to the 2010 census, 36% Russian, 29.5% Bashkir and 25.4% Tatar. Historically, in the 20th century the percentage of Russians has remained more or less stable, between 42.44% in 1959 down to the 36.05% of 2010. The balance between Tatars and Bashkirs has, on the contrary, fluctuated: while in 1920 most of the Turkic population was Bashkir (40.13%), with very few Tatars (5.17%), in 1926 the proportion had changed (23.48% versus 17.55% Tatars)[6].

The change was even more drastic in 1939, when the Tatar population was even larger than the Bashkir: 24.60% versus 21.25%. The respective positions of Tatars and Bashkirs remained in favour of the first until 1989, when the Tatar were 28.42% and the Bashkir 21.91%. In the last

[6] These are the official figures from the Russian census.

censuses, 2002 and 2010, the Bashkir became again the first Turkic people in Bashkortostan. Let us remember that in the Russian censuses, the principle is to accept the subjective understanding of each individual about his/her 'nationality' i.e. ethnic belonging (see Toulouze, Vallikivi 2015). The Bashkir are the eponymous people of the Republic. Since the beginning of the 1990s, the political power in Ufa, particularly with president Murtaza Rakhimov (1993-2010), had promoted an aggressive Bashkirisation policy, encouraging the population to declare itself Bashkir. As it is very unlikely that people with a Russian ethnic awareness would ever declare themselves Bashkir, this policy was in priority directed towards Tatars. Indeed, the Turkic identity is divided between Tatar and Bashkir awareness, especially in Tatyshly district. Actually, the same may be said of the whole area inhabited by the Udmurt. According to linguists, the Turkic language spoken in this area is an intermediate dialect between Tatar and Bashkir, which, depending on one's beliefs, is either Eastern Tatar or Western Bashkir (see Gabdrafikov 2003, 2007, 2011). But the mere fact that the Udmurt's neighbours are Turkic protected them from interference in their religious life because the missionary activity of the Orthodox Church was weak in the Muslim territories. Moreover, the Turkic population was less eager to embrace communism than the Russian. Turkic identities were and still are in some ways very much linked to religious identity as Muslims. This led Tatars and/or Bashkirs to be more accommodating of religious Udmurts. Some Turkic leaders of local collective farms, or kolkhozes, even supported Udmurt sacrifices, asserting that "when the Udmurt ask for rain, it rains"[7].

The third characteristic of Tatyshly district is its utter agrarian character. Even the district centre is not a city, but a small town (*село*) inhabited by 6,650 people. There were no industrial challenges and this remoteness from what the Communist Party considered as its priorities helped preserve traditions.

The other districts where Eastern Udmurt dwell presented less favourable conditions. The biggest Udmurt population in Bashkortostan is in the Yanaul district, the administrative centre of which, Yanaul, has officially been a town (*город*) since 1991 and had, in 2020, 25,109 inhabitants[8]. Moreover, the Udmurt villages in this district represent several clusters, although they do not form any compact Udmurt zone. It is the same with the other districts concerned – Kaltasy, Buraevo, Baltachevo – the others having only isolated Udmurt villages in an alien context.

[7] This is a sentence often heard in this area (FWM 2013, 2017, 2018).

[8] See https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%AF%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%83%D0%BB (25/06/2021).

Indeed, in most villages at some moments collective ceremonies were discontinued. The exact time when this happened could be different. Sometimes it was in the 1950s, but in most cases it was later, in the 1970s–1980s. Usually this happened when the acting sacrificial priest died and there was no one to take over his functions. Sometimes he even organised his own succession: in Kasiarovo village in Buraevo district in the 1990s the dying sacrificial priest asked two of his helpers to step in (Sadikov 2019: 265). But despite his preparation they did not become priests, until, in 2015, pressure from the population and difficulties in one of these potential sacrificial priest's lives, which he interpreted as being punishment for his neglect, compelled him to start the ceremonies anew.

Indeed, this did not happen by mere chance. It was but one episode in a process that had started much earlier, as early as the end of the 1980s. Even before the fall of the Soviet Union, a religious awakening had taken place in the Udmurt villages. On the one hand, the local leaders – kolkhoz chairmen or administration heads – took initiative first in renovating sacred places and building cabins there for the comfort of the sacrificial priests and their helpers. At the same time, they started to investigate, in all villages in which the ceremonies had been discontinued, the possibility of revitalising them. They asked active members of village communities and former leaders to look for descendants of sacrificial priests who would agree to take over prayers at the ceremonies (FWM 2014, 2015, 2018[9]).

At the same time, this initiative clearly answered the wishes of the population. This process took years to touch practically all Udmurt villages and collective ceremonies were revitalised everywhere. In the case of wider ceremonies, encompassing the whole of the Eastern Udmurt area, the process led to very successful revitalisation. It is the case with the *Elen vös'* ceremony (Sadikov 2010). It is a ceremony known from the end of the 19th century, in which the Eastern Udmurt gathered from different villages and prayed together. This ceremony was performed in rotation between three villages: Kirga in the Kueda district of Perm kray, Altaevo in the Buraevo district of Bashkortostan, and Staryy Varyash in the Yanaul district of Bashkortostan. The ceremonies were discontinued as soon as the 1920s. Although all of the Eastern Udmurt area was involved, memory of the ceremony did not remain, except in the three villages concerned. It was in Altaevo that the impulse to revitalise this ceremony started. Altaevo is the birthplace of one of the most respected sacrificial priests of the 21st century, Anatoliy Galikhanov, and his brother Kasim. Kasim Galikhanov is a well-

[9] Conversations at the district administration, 2014/06; with the new district centre sacrificial priest, 2015/06; with Yuriy Menzaripovich Sadyrov, 2018/06.

known architect and artist in Izhevsk, the capital of Udmurt Republic, where he has also been active in matters of revitalisation of Udmurt traditions. As a member of the Izhevsk association of the Eastern Udmurt, he and the head of that organisation, Flyura Chibysheva, organised the rebirth of the *Elen vös'* ceremony in 2008 (FWM 2018[10]).

This important ceremony, which is indeed attended by Udmurts from most Bashkortostan districts and other regions inhabited by Eastern Udmurt[11], has been very illuminating in revealing the differences today in living traditions (FWM 2019[12]), proving that no standardisation of the ceremonies is going on (we shall comment on this later).

Although this is not the main topic of this book, it is important to notice that collective ceremonies are not the only ritual practice alive in this region. Indeed, in all of the Udmurt territories, private rituals have been much better preserved than collective ones. They were submitted to less publicity and could be performed without state control (see Toulouze & Vallikivi 2021). Commemorations of the dead, seasonal prayers[13], weddings, rituals around childbirth, etc., are performed according to traditional rules, often also in Udmurtia in areas in which the Russian Orthodox Church is strong, in syncretism with Christian practices. But we shall not develop this theme here.

The collective ceremonies in Tatyshly district

As we already mentioned, Tatyshly district is overwhelmingly agrarian, with a majority Turkic Muslim population and a cluster of Udmurt villages. Here, Udmurt religious practice has been widely preserved. It is certainly not the only place: in Yanaul district there are some villages, such as Kaymashabash, where there has been no interruption of religious practice (FWM 2019[14]). In Tatyshly district, active practice encompasses more than one village, or even more than one village level. Here the 19 villages are connected into a ceremonious system at three, or even four levels. This system functions most fully for the spring ceremonies, whose cycle is supposed to finish around the summer solstice.

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[10] Conversations with Kasim Galikhanov 2018/07 and Flyura Chibysheva 2018/07.

[11] The Eastern Udmurt inhabit not only Bashkortostan but also the Kuyeda district of Perm kray. There are also many Eastern Udmurt living in Udmurtia.

[12] *Elen vös'* 2019, Staryy Varyash, Yanaul district, Bashkortostan.

[13] See Toulouze 2018.

[14] Kaymashabash, Yshtiyak vös', July 2019.