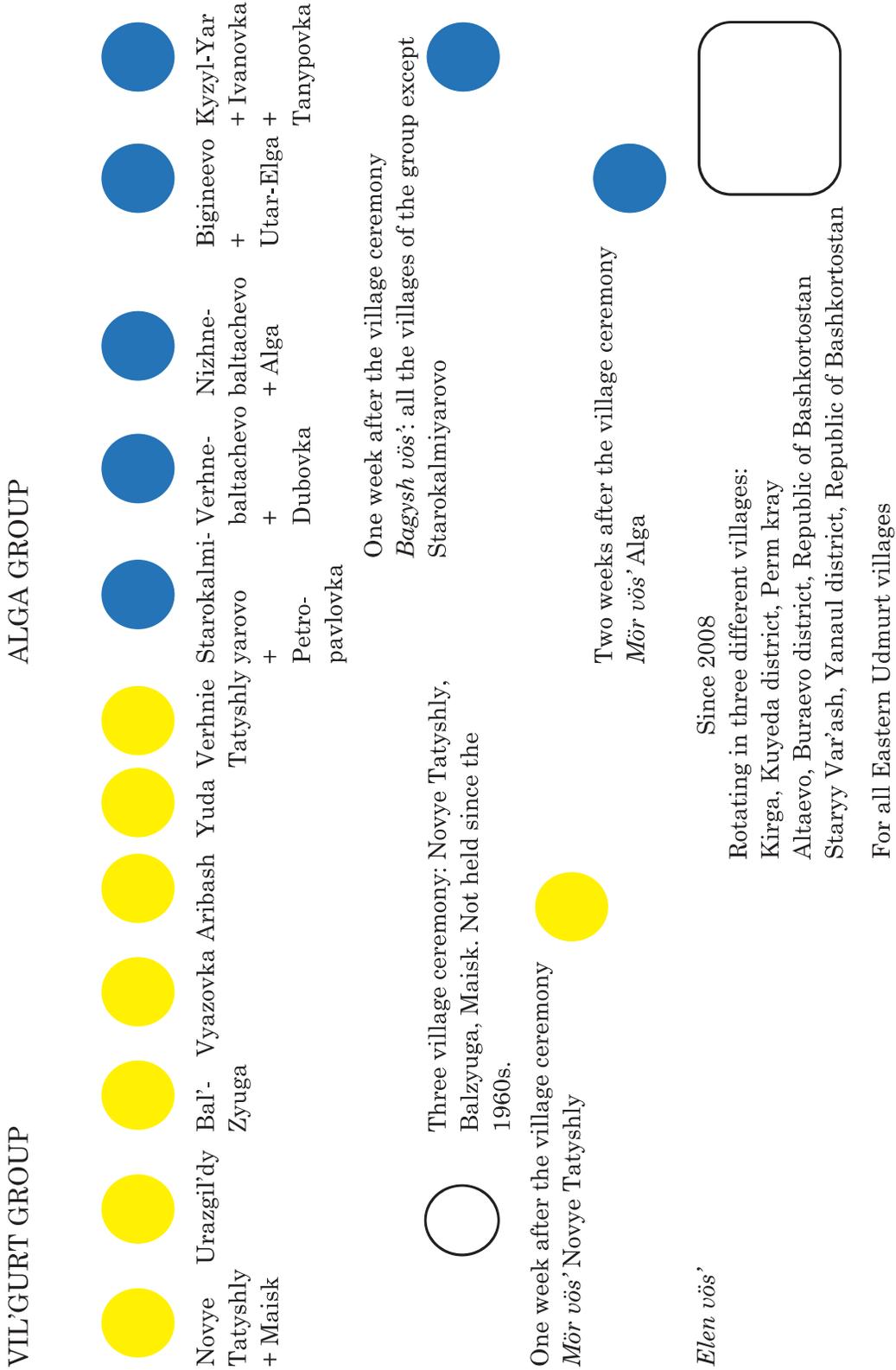


# The spring cycle of ceremonies



The spring cycle, as we see with the help of the diagram above, follows a general pattern that is more or less symmetrical. We shall now give a short overview of the annual ceremonial cycle and then comment in more detail on each level.

The first observation is that the villages in Tatyshly district are divided into two religious groups, which are coordinated for their ceremonies, although their traditions are slightly different. The spring/summer ceremonies start at the village level with the *gurt vös'* ceremonies supposedly taking place the same day in all the village. In reality there can be a three-day shift (from Friday to Sunday), but all the festivals are held during the same week. The following week is the time for the next level ceremony, which was initially a three-village event. In one group, it ceased to take place at the beginning of the 1960s. But in the other group, not only did it go on, but it gathered more and more participants, so that in 2020 all the villages of the group but one were present at *Bagysh vös'*. Symmetry is re-established for the ceremony gathering the whole of the group, and which are held within one week of one another. Since 2008 the cycle has ended with the participation of whoever wishes to attend at the big gathering of the Eastern Udmurt, the *Elen vös'*, in which usually representatives of both groups, the most engaged of the sacrificial priests, participate with a common sacrifice.

### The village level: *gurt vös'*

In principle, all the villages in the district have each their own separate ceremony. This is certainly the first level. All the village ceremonies take place, in principle, on the same day. We have twice repeated the formula “in principle”. This is indeed the rule, but exceptions and adjustments are possible.

Some of the Udmurt villages in the district are very small. Moreover, some of them are historically the extensions of other, bigger villages. In some cases, these small villages join, for the village ceremony, a bigger village. Thus, there are not really 20 village ceremonies in the district, but fewer: Maysk and Novye Tatyshly, Alga and Nizhnebaltachevo, Utar Elga and Bigineevo, Tanypovka, Kzylyar and Ivanovka, Starokalmiyarovo and Petropavlovka have their ceremonies together. But it is true that each village has a village ceremony, alone or with one of the neighbouring communities.

Indeed, the rule is that the village ceremonies take place the same day. But this is not an iron rule. In some cases, one village may organise its village ceremony on another day. We have some examples from our fieldwork. In 2014, we attended the Balzyuga spring ceremony on June 6th. As our helper Anna Baydullina, from Urazgildy village, was interested in having

us record her village ceremony, she discussed having the village ceremony two days later, on June 8th, with the ceremony organiser. They discussed that while Friday<sup>15</sup> was the best day for ceremonies, Sunday was also acceptable (while Saturday was excluded). In the same way, the last of the ceremonies revitalised in the district usually takes place not on Friday, but on Sunday. It is the ceremony at the administrative centre of the district, Verkhnie Tatyshly. For years, the ceremony for nine villages was held there. Later a more discreet location was chosen and that ceremony started taking place in Novye Tatyshly (Vil'gurt). The revitalisation of the village ceremony was not an easy task. The Udmurt are but a small minority of the population in the town, and the sacred place no longer existed. While memory can approximately position the sacred place, it is now in a residential zone of town and nobody actually remembers the precise location. So a new one had to be found. It was provided on private land owned by the son of Rinat Galyamshin (1948–2020), the charismatic Udmurt regional leader. His son, Rustam, offered some of his land, built fences and a cabin and in 2015 the first ceremony was held. Actually, the organisers did not trust that there would be anyone in attendance, and did not provide a sacrificial animal, so the ceremony took place using a porridge without meat. They were surprised by the success of the enterprise and in later years, the order was re-established properly with a sacrificial ewe. There is another exception to the Friday rule, with the ceremony in Starokalmiyarovo-Petropavlovka, but we shall come to this later.

This was the first level. In order to explain the other levels, we must go back to the structure of the 19 Udmurt villages in Tatyshly district. The district is crossed by a river officially called the Yug (Yuk in Udmurt), which divides the Udmurt cluster into two parts. It also represents the border between the lands belonging to two cooperatives, still called by the people *kolkhoz*, one a homogenous Udmurt cooperative called Demen ('Together' in Udmurt) and the other a mixed Udmurt-Tatar cooperative called Rassvet ('Dawn' in Russian). On one side of the river, there were nine Udmurt villages, now eight (Novye Tatyshly/Vil'gurt, Nizhnie Tatyshly<sup>16</sup>, Verhnie Tatyshly, Maysk, Urazgil'dy, Malaya Bal'zyuga, Yuda, Aribash, Vyazovka), on the other eleven (Utar-El'ga, Bigineevo, Nizhnebaltachevo, Alga, Verhnebaltachevo, Dubovka, Starokalmiyarovo, Petropavlovka, Kyzyl-Yar, Ivanovka, Tanypovka). They form the two religious groups, which we

<sup>15</sup> In some dialects of Udmurt, Friday is called *udmurtarnya*, which means 'Udmurt week', showing that it was an important day for the Udmurt.

<sup>16</sup> When the system was established, it was a separate village. However, today it is part of the district centre and is no longer considered a village.

call the Vil'gurt group and the Alga group, depending on the place where they gather for the third level ceremony.

After all the villages have held their village ceremonies, historically the two groups had, before the 1950s, an intermediate ceremony encompassing three villages. In the Vilgurt group, the villages of Novye Tatyshly, Maysk and Urazgil'de had a common ceremony called *kuin' gurt vös'*, 'ceremony of three villages'. This, second level, ceremony was suppressed by Nazip Sadriev, the main religious authority in that group at the end of the 1950s in order to concentrate their attention on the ceremonies at the first and the third levels. The three villages ceremony added to the villagers' expenses by adding one sacrifice to the others and required from the sacrificial priest and his assistants additional efforts, i.e. they had thus three Fridays occupied in June.

### The multiple villages group level: *mör vös'*

The week after the village ceremony, the ceremony of all the villages in the group takes place in Novye Tatyshly. Formerly it was organised at the administrative centre, Verkhnie Tatyshly, but in the 1970s the main sacrificial priest chose more discreet locations, as far as possible from the control of Communist Party officials. This ceremony is called *mör vös'*. The term *mör* refers to the village community in old Russia, called *mir*. It is led by the sacrificial priest(s) of Novye Tatyshly.

In the other group, the 'Alga group', the three-villages ceremony has not been suppressed. On the contrary, what was initially a three-village ceremony, including Nizhnebaltachevo, Verkhnebaltachevo and Kyzyl'yar (Sadikov 2019: 260), has increased to 8 villages: all but Starokalmiyarovo and Petropavlovka attend (Sadikov 2019: 267). The last to join has been Bigineevo, in 2015, when we were already documenting the rituals. This ritual takes place one week after the village ceremonies, i.e. when the Vilgurt group holds its *mör vös'*. This ceremony is not held in a village, but in a sacred place situated in a field beside the road to Kyzyl-Yar. It is characterised by a huge fir tree, encompassed in a fenced space and has a small shed. The ceremony is called *Bagysh vös'*, according to the name of the former owner of the field, a man called Bagysh.

We mentioned that Starokalmiyarovo and Petropavlovka did not hold their village ceremony on the same day as the others. As they are not connected with *Bagysh vös'*, they hold their village ceremony when all the other villages celebrate *Bagysh vös'*. We must also add that for a long time, before the 1970s, Starokalmiyarovo held its village ceremony with another village, which is not in the district. Historically a part of the village population left

and founded a new village a couple of dozen kilometres away, in what is now the Kueda district in the Perm region. Until the 1960s the inhabitants of the new village, called Kalmiyar, held their village ceremonies with their mother village (FW 2018). This may explain why this village is slightly out of sync with the rest of the villages in the district.

The next week, when the Vilgurt group has achieved their tasks in the cycle, the last ceremony within the district takes place, the Alga group's *mör vös'*. The first explanation we were given about the shift in time was that the big ceremonies were not held simultaneously in order to allow kin to visit. Still the explanation seems to be an *a posteriori* makeshift explanation, and certainly a recent one. Indeed, in the actual tradition people were not supposed to attend other village's ceremonies than their own. The presence of aliens was limited in this respect. This corresponds to our observations: we have never seen anybody but the community members, except anthropologists, attend this kind of ceremony. Moreover, nobody ever seems to know how the neighbours perform their rituals. One of the novelties our films have probably brought is the opportunity to see how the other villages conduct their ceremonies.

## The winter ceremonies

The spring *mör vös* has its equivalent around the winter solstice. The names remain the same, with the addition of the word for winter, *tol: tol gurt vös', tol Bagysh vös', tol mor vös'*. Still not all of these are implemented. Among the 19 villages there is at the moment only one *tol gurt vös'* or winter village ceremony, in Starokalmiyarovo. The other villages do not perform this ceremony. The Alga group's *tol Bagysh vös'*, or winter three-village ceremony, is held in the same location as the summer one, with 8 villages participating. Both groups have *tol mör vös'* ceremonies, but while in the Alga group's ceremony all villages are encompassed, only three or four participate in the Vilgurt group's: Novye Tatyshly, Maysk, Malaya Bal'zuga and sometimes Urazgil'dy (FWM 2016<sup>17</sup>).

Of course, the conditions in which these winter ceremonies take place are quite different. Usually there is lots of snow, and temperatures, in this continental region, are quite low, in our experience from -10 centigrade at the winter *Bagysh vös'* in 2013 (with a snowstorm) down to -28 centigrade at Novye Tatyshly's *tol mör vös'* in 2016. This means working in harsh

<sup>17</sup> About the participation of Urazgil'dy we were given contradictory information by Salim Shakirov and Rais Rafikov. Notwithstanding this, that year Urazgil'dy did not attend. Novye Tatyshly, *tol gurt vös'*, 2016.

conditions for all those who butcher the sacrificial animals and who sort the meat as they have to work with their bare hands. They are supported by the infrastructure on the spot: in both *mör vös'* places, there are cabins meant to protect the helpers and the sacrificial priests from the harsh climatic conditions. This is not the case with the *Tol Bagysh vös'* sacred place as there is only a small shed. However, Eva felt personally the comfort it gave when, in December 2013, she was ready to spend all the time observing the ritual from outside the fence, but the organiser, Farhulla Garifanov, pitied her and brought her to the shed. In Alga, the cabin has a most welcome stove, so it presents a real contrast with the frost outdoors. In Novye Tatyshly, there is no stove, only small electric heaters produce a little heat. Nevertheless, helpers go as much as possible inside, to drink hot tea, and to achieve all that must be done with bare hands. Otherwise, all the activities are indeed outdoors, although they require or tolerate gloves.

#### VIL'GURT GROUP

#### ALGA GROUP



Starokalmiyarovo  
+  
Petropavlovka  
*Tol gurt vös'*

One week after the  
village ceremony  
*Tol Bagysh vös'*:  
all the villages of  
the group except  
Starokalmiyarovo



One week after the Alga group  
*Tol Bagysh vös'*  
*Tol Mör vös'*  
Novye Tatyshly, with  
only four villages in attendance



Two weeks after the village  
ceremony and one week after the  
*Tol Bagysh vös'*  
*Mör vös'*  
Alga



At the 2016 Vil'gurt *tol mör vös'* the sacrificial priest, Rais Rafikov, also sacrificed a goose at the very beginning of the ceremony. He went to a neighbouring house, where the goose was, and prayed in the yard for the sake of all the birds of the world. He told us later that this was not a compulsory part of the ritual, but when there is an opportunity, he is happy to perform this sacrifice as well. This episode is also recorded in the film about the winter ceremony.

In the first year of our research we attended both of the Alga group's winter ceremonies and were impressed by the beauty of the glittering snow under the winter sun, as we will try to show with the photos. The experience showed for us the swift functioning of the sacrificial priests and helpers and how they are a real and effective team. There was no remarkable difference between the spring and winter ceremonies in the proceedings, except with the branches used in the ritual actions, which were fir in winter instead of birch in spring.

### The regional level: *Elen vös'*

We must conclude this overview of Udmurt ceremonies in Tatyshly district by mentioning the very last ceremony, which is not indeed a local ceremony, in which representatives of both district's groups participate. The *Elen vös'*, the ceremony of the country, was supposed to be a gathering of all the Eastern Udmurt. And here, the proceedings are slightly different because different local traditions meet, if not clash.

Eva and Liivo attended this ceremony in 2013 in Kirga (Perm kray, Kueda district). In 2018, in Staryy Varyash (Yanaul district of Bashkortostan), Eva attended, but not alone: Evgeniy Badretdinov, a student from the Udmurt University, had joined her for fieldwork. They are difficult to compare, because in 2013 we had just started to discover this world, while in 2018 we had already had a good experience of the ceremonies so we could understand what was going on better. In both cases there were certainly several villages represented, usually the most active of the villages and the most active of the sacrificial priests. In 2013 there was a minivan from Tatyshly district with three sacrificial priests, two from Vil'gurt, Salim Shakirov and Rais Rafikov, and one from Balzyuga, Fridman Kabipyanyanov, with some helpers from Balzyuga. One of the priests, Salim Shakirov, prayed along with others from other districts. Later the main organiser of the Alga group Farhulla Garifanov and that group's main priest Evgeni Adullin also attended, but as helpers to the Vilgurt priests. From other districts there was the well-known sacrificial priest Anatoliy Galikhanov, representing one of the historical

villages for *Elen vös'*, Altaevo in the Buraevo district, and somebody from Staryy Varyash, and Kirga, the two other villages that take turns to host this ceremony. On the first occasion we arrived with the Tatyshly district team, and spent most of the time with people with whom we were by the time well acquainted. Eva was cautious and asked her colleague Ranus Sadikov to ask the main sacrificial priest, Galikhanov, whether she was allowed within the fenced space. The answer was favourable, on condition that she would keep her scarf on and that she would wash her hands before entering.

In 2018, Galikhanov was also there, and Rais Rafikov prayed with the others. Evgeni Adullin and Farhulla Garifanov from the Alga group were also there from the very beginning, together forming a team. In 2013 we had noticed the representatives of Kaltasy district. They were easily recognisable because theirs is the only local group in which the women play a considerable role as the priest's helpers, while in other districts tradition requires ritual activities to be the exclusive domain of men. In 2018, they attended as well, but this time we did not feel any tension around them. We were acquainted with them as well as with the sacrificial priest, and our team spent some time with them.

The two locations are different and created a different atmosphere: the Kirga location is a wide fenced space on a field by the forest; the Varyash, a somehow less comfortable space in which some industrial objects stand not quite in the sacred space, but still close enough that they could disturb the visual harmony.

People from very different and distant communities come to celebrate *Elen vös'*, which can even be problematic. The first disruption is that everybody arrives separately and at different times. The second is the huge variety in ritual tradition and the fluctuation of the participating parties. We have always witnessed the presence of the three rotating host 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. Usually Tatyshly district attends with a ewe, a sacrificial priest and a team of helpers; Kaltasy also attends with a ewe and a sacrificial priest. But there are districts that do not bring an animal, meaning that their priest cannot take part in the prayer. Actually, the participants come from many regions, even from as far as Izhevsk, where a bus is usually organised for the Eastern Udmurt living in Udmurtia as well as for journalists and tourists. Each side of the fence acts independently for most of the time.

The tensions between different traditions appeared very clearly in 2018. In 2013 we did not notice them, but this could be because the expertise acquired in the meanwhile helped us to identify the problematic points, and our closer acquaintance with the priests allowed them to share their

opinion more freely with us. The tensions were due to differences in local traditions that disturbed some of the sacrificial priests.

Let us sum up the differences we pinpointed between the two ceremonies. As the 2013 *Elen vös* is the subject of one of the films on the DVD, we will concentrate on the 2018 ceremony.

The first important moment is when Galikhanov and the host, the sacrificial priest from Staryy Varyash, begin the ceremony. Curiously, in 2018 it was almost a private ceremony: nobody stood or knelt behind them, and nobody, except our team, paid them any attention. In 2013 we did not identify such a moment. Meanwhile other helpers slaughtered their sacrifice in a grove. Galikhanov uttered a prayer at the end of which the two priests bowed three times and turned clockwise three times. Then Galikhanov threw a piece of the bread he held in his hands into the fire, ate another piece and gave a third to his fellow priest.

Another disturbing practice was that the Yanaul sacrificial animal was a ram, while the others had ewes. Galikhanov was angry: “how many times have I said them that they must sacrifice ewes!” Listening to Galikhanov, we thought that it was some kind of carelessness, that the sex of the animal was not important in the Yanaul district. However, while attending a ceremony in the Yanaul district, Eva learnt that in their tradition, the sacrificial animal must be a ram, and a ram whose blood had never been shed, which means that it was not castrated. So, our first impression was not right. While in the Buraevo and the Tatyshly districts, it must be a ewe, we are reminded that in Aribash, they must sacrifice a ram. So, Galikhanov uttered another prayer, in order not to let sacrifices being slaughtered without an accompanying prayer and repeated the same ritual gestures. Rais Rafikov was also disturbed by slaughtering without a prayer, and Galikhanov encouraged him to say his own prayer. So Rais also stood and behind him Galikhanov as well as other sacrificial priests and Farhulla also knelt while he prayed. When he bowed and said *Omin'*, all the others bent their heads to the earth.

These actions were achieved in a kind of in-between area. There is something like a fence symbolically separating the area where the audience would sit and the area where the religious specialists prepared the porridge and where the cauldrons stood. At this stage, the priests, both Galikhanov and Rais Rafikov, were standing in this area and looking in the direction of the cauldrons, while the kneeling participants stood behind them, between Rais and a row of cars and trucks, and practically on one level with the fence. Later, they would pray looking in the same direction, but standing on the audience side, behind the fence.

Later in the course of ceremony, when the audience is already gathered, the priests stand in front of the audience and talk about the offerings of money. They were quite close to the audience, closer than they would be for the general prayers. When every team has its porridge ready, the priests who are going to pray take a bowl of porridge and go in front of the participants and pray. At this point in 2018 there was a curious incident: Rais Rafikov, who was clearly not accustomed to the *Elen vös'*, had his bowl full of meat, as is usual in his village ceremonies. Then he saw that the others prayed with porridge, and he quickly added a spoonful of porridge to the meat. This is a good example of the clashing of traditions. The sacrificial priests pray one after another, most of them reading from a piece of paper: first the host, the sacrificial priest from Varyash, then Galikhanov, then Rais Rafikov, then Kirga and at the end Nasipullin, the Kaltasy sacrificial priest.

When the people have received their share of porridge, there is a second prayer, probably about the money offered. But here only four priests prayed: the host, Altaevo, represented by Galikhanov, and two other priests from Tatyshly and Kaltasy. At the end of the prayer, Galikhanov always turns towards the audience to thank them for their presence and to give them some instructions.

## Sacred places

What we call sacred places have two names in Udmurt constructed on the same principle and omitting the concept of sacredness: *vös' inty* 'place of sacrifice', *kuris'kon inty* 'place of prayer'. Sacred places are not a motionless concept, outside time. Sacred places are born at some moment and later may be abandoned. Tatyshly district offers good examples of the dynamics of sacred places. However, it is often difficult to reconstruct precisely the history of a sacred place. Memories can be untrustworthy, they usually contain what came before and what happened, but with a twisted, or more precisely vague, chronology.

Sacred places present different configurations, each having its own distinct features. If we look for common features, we will find that water is close by. Some have trees, some do not. To start with the sacred places, we will note in Tatyshly district, the sacred place for the Malaya Bal'zyuga *vös' inty* is at the edge of the village, beyond the last houses. It is a fenced area at the top of a wooded hill, visible from the main road that connects the villages. This is certainly the reason why during the Soviet period, Party officials were once able to disrupt the village ceremony, pushing over the cauldrons so that the porridge was not edible. But the obstinate sacrificial