

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

priest, Nazip Sadriev, immediately relocated the sacred place 50 metres away so that the proceedings were no longer visible from the road and the ceremony went ahead the next year. For that, they had just to displace some ashes from the sacred fire and bring them over to the new place. When the traditional ceremonies became safe, the old place came into use again and is still in use today. The temporary place was even closer to the brook where the assistants draw water.

We know from older villagers that there were not one but three places for the spring village ceremony (FWM 2014¹⁸). According to the rules, the ceremony had to be held in the direction where rye had been sown. As traditionally rye was rotated annually between three fields, there were three prayer places. When the system changed, supposedly in the 1950s, only one remained.

Let us describe other places for village ceremonies in the Vilgurt group. Urazgil'dy village is a significant one with several hundred inhabitants. The sacred place is also very close to the village, fenced and parallel to the main streets, below the village which is on a ridge. The sacred place is also particularly well situated concerning the need for water, for a spring is in the territory. When the ceremonies take place there is a very picturesque view from the ridge above (FWM 2014).

Far less picturesque, but indeed easier to access, is the brand-new sacred place in Verhnie Tatyshly, the district's administrative centre. It is on a lawn close to new dwelling houses at one end of the village, according to Sadikov not far from the previous sacred place (Sadikov 2019: 267). The landscape around is treeless, only lawn and houses, although at one end the village does not continue and there is an air of openness about the place. It is easily reached by car. A cabin has been built for the comfort of the people praying. We have not identified a water source there but with the proximity of dwellings access to water is guaranteed.

Further north-west one road leads to the village of Yuda, which is a small village nestling in a valley. It is one of the last to have had its village ceremony revitalised, but it has a very agreeable sacred place on the shore of the river. The place is fenced and is small and cosy; it is beside a brook and so had direct access to water (FWM 2015).

In the other direction, the road leads to another Udmurt village called Aribash. Actually, two villages are contiguous: one larger, Kardon, with a mixed population, and Aribash, which is mainly Udmurt. The sacrificial priest is an elder man who was born in the village and has good memory

¹⁸ Information by Nazip Sadriev, born 1930 in Malaya Bal'zuga, on 06/06/2014 at the Bal'zuga *gurt vös'*. See also Liivo Niglas' film *Gurt vös'*, 2018.

of how the ceremonies were in his youth. His wife is indeed knowledgeable in traditional religious matters, although she is from a different village. In this village, there are two different sacred places. One, which came into use before the other, when revitalisation happened, is a place formerly used for the Keremet¹⁹ ceremonies. It has several features of Keremet ceremonies, which have been adopted in the ceremonies held today, which are definitely not Keremet ceremonies. This is the place where Aribash's *gurt vös'* takes place, the ceremony that allows the village to participate in the subsequent *mör vös'*. It is in a grove at the top of a hill and has been totally fenced off. The water point is below, in the valley, where a brook ran quite far away from the sacred place and so the efforts of the assistants are required to bring the necessary water. The brook also provided the younger men helping with a comfortable place to swim. During the spring village ceremony, the following features distinguish this village ceremony from others (all are loaned from Keremet ceremonies): the sacrificial animal is not a ewe but a ram; the ceremony is attended by men only; and the organisers bring pan breads (*kuarn'an'*) (FWM 2014, 2015²⁰). Must we infer that sacred places have an agency of their own?

The second sacred place in Aribash that we visited in 2014 was well preserved and repaired, and is much closer to the village. It is on the shore of a river and is a fenced smaller area with one or two trees. After 2016 it has been brought into use again and, according to the priest, is used once every two years so that both places alternate (FWM 2017²¹).

Vyazovka is a bit further than the previous villages, a beautiful natural space with forest. Rocks and a river separate it from the other villages, and it is not a surprise that this space has been used for touristic purposes. Vyazovka's sacred place, a fenced space, is situated in a grove below the

¹⁹ Keremet is another deity in the Udmurt pantheon – and in the pantheon of other peoples in the Volga region – who plays a role in Inmar's creation work, taking the opposite position to Inmar. The origin of Keremet goes back to a pre-Muslim central Asian cult adopted by the Udmurt through the Bulgars. He has another Udmurt name, *Lud*. His cult is quite demanding and harsh, for Keremet is not a kind god. The places dedicated to his cult are groves. About Keremet see Vladykin 1994: 109–110, 202–203; Shutova 2001: 236). For an account of a living Keremet ceremony, see Toulouze & Niglas 2016.

²⁰ In 2014, Eva Toulouze, Laur Vallikivi, Liivo Niglas and Anna Baydullina visited the village and the sacrificial priest's family; his wife showed us the sacred places on 11/06/2014. In 2015, on 05/06, Eva Toulouze and Ranus Sadikov attended the village's *gurt vös'*.

²¹ Conversation with Aleksey Garaev and Lilia Garaeva on 07/06/2017 with Eva Toulouze, Laur Vallikivi, Liivo Niglas, Ranus Sadikov and Irina Samigulova.

village and is properly hidden from unwanted attention. A spring runs almost through the sacred place, just below it. A very short way away from the fence, in the shade of some trees, there is a rest area where the sacrificial priest and the civil authorities rest even during the ceremonies (FWM 2017²²).

We shall finish this overview of the Vilgurt's group sacred places with a description of Vil'gurt village's sacred place. As mentioned before, this is the Udmurt name of the village officially called Novye Tatyshly. It is very close to the district centre, Verhnie Tatyshly, which is less than 10 km away. Vil'gurt is by local standards an important village being the centre of the former Demen kolkhoz. Demen was, in the Soviet era, the main employer in the nearest villages for it covered not only this village, but also employed people from the four villages that today form one municipality: Novye Tatyshly, Maysk, Urazgil'dy and Bal'zyuga. Other institutions were and partially remain in the village: the municipality, the rural police representative, the library, the culture house, a school with all classes from elementary up to high school, and of course the office of the agricultural cooperative that is still called kolkhoz. There was also a canteen and a small hotel, but both have closed in recent years. There is also a Mosque for the Tatar Muslim population. Thus, the village is a kind of administrative centre as well. The village is also the home for the National Cultural Centre, the local headquarters of the Udmurt national movement. The village is also home to the Historical and Cultural Centre of the Bashkortostan Udmurt, a branch of the House of Peoples' Friendship of Bashkortostan, the organisation in charge of the cultural needs of the ethnic groups living in the Republic.

The sacred place in Vil'gurt is in the village itself, close to its border. Close by runs a brook, from which water may be drawn if need be, although usually water is brought by the sacrificial priest in a cart at the beginning of the gathering. This sacred place is a large fenced space with a cabin where the sacrificial priests can count the collected money and, in winter, the helpers can sort the sacrificial meat and everybody eat the porridge. The Vil'gurt sacred place is well used as it serves both for the *gurt vös'* and for both *mör vös'*, the spring ceremony and the winter one.

In this sacred place, a huge change took place between 2013 and 2016. Within the wider fenced area, in 2013, there was no subdivision. The fireplaces, the place where the priests prayed or where the lambs were slaughtered, not to mention the place where they were butchered, were all encompassed in the same area, which was accessible to all, priests, helpers,

²² Observations by Eva Toulouze, Ranus Sadikov, Laur Vallikivi and Nikolai Anisimov at Vyazovka *gurt vös'* on 07/06/2017.

anthropologists and participants alike. As we shall see later, this was not the case in the other *mör vös*' sacred place in the district, in Alga. There, a fence inside the main fence separated the area where the priests and helpers worked from the space accessible to the audience.

In December 2016 we attended the winter *mör vös*' in the same space, by which time the place had been changed. Within the fenced area a second smaller area had been fenced off, encompassing the fireplaces, the far end of the space where the priests prayed, and the slaughtering area. The participants were to remain outside and watch as well as pray. We must acknowledge that at some moment we thought that perhaps the intrusion of anthropologists roaming around had provoked a wish to protect the ritual space. But in 2018 Ranus and Eva attended the village ceremony and, although Eva demonstratively did not enter the fenced area, the sacrificial priest invited her very insistently to enter, so that the explanation had to lie elsewhere. Probably historically the configuration of the sacred places was such and the sacrificial priest, Rais, was attempting to return to the origins of the ceremony.

But is there a difference between the Vil'gurt group and the Alga group concerning sacred places? Let us have a look at those places used by the Alga group. We may start from the Village of Alga, where the sacred place is used only for *mör vös*' ceremonies, both in Spring and Winter. Alga is a very small village with less than 100 inhabitants who have their village ceremony with the neighbouring bigger village of Nizhnebaltachevo, at the latter village. Alga was not the original place for *mör vös*'. Before moving to Alga in the 1970s the sacred place for the biggest ceremony was in Starokal'miyarovo. According to older people who remember the earlier location of the *mör vös*, it was on a hill in a very visible place. When the visibility became too dangerous, the villagers transferred the ceremony to another place down in the valley, a most spectacular location according to our informants. Unhappily, the authorities decided that it had to be flooded as they had ordered the building of a dam to produce electricity for the area. The sacred place was then transferred to Alga.

Today, the sacred place where the ceremonies of Starokal'miyarovo and Petropavlovka take place is on the top of a hill with a nice view of the surroundings (village houses and bare hills). It is a relatively small location divided into two fenced areas: one for the participants, with benches, and one for the priests and their helpers. As we noticed on other occasions, the population has no feeling of taboo concerning this area dedicated to religious

specialists (FWM 2018).²³ Both men and women transgress these taboos freely and must be called to order (FWM 2013, 2015).²⁴

The position of the sacred space is quite similar to the sacred place in Verkhnebaltachevo, which is used for the joint ceremony of this village and Dubovka. This is also close to the village, but without a view of it as the hills around are pastures for sheep. The fenced area is a very small enclosure, with a shed for the ceremony's paraphernalia of approximately 4x4 metres. There is actually no need for more. There is only one priest praying, two sacrificial animals and two cauldrons, and the participants sit on the grass in front of the fenced area. They receive the porridge from the priest, who stands in the area. Three helpers circulate between the two areas.

The sacred place in Nizhnebaltachevo had changed several times. When we attended the ceremony for the first time, in 2016, it was a small fenced area, perhaps 6x6 metres on the bank of a river not far from a spring, which was situated at some 50 metres. This area, with a small shed, represents, as in Verkhnebaltachevo, the inner circle. Here too the participants who come to eat the porridge sit outside this area. We were told that this sacred place had functioned for ten years. Actually, it had not long to live. In 2019 the priest and the organiser decided to change the location of the sacred place again in order to bring it closer to the spring. A ceremony was performed in 2019 to achieve this change.

Of the sacred places of the Alga group villages three have not yet been described. Similar to these last two places is one where the population of Kyzyl-Yar and Ivanovka gather, a very small enclosure outside the village also dedicated to those who perform the tasks of the common ceremony of the two villages. The sacred place in Bigineevo is different in that it is encompassed in a grove at some 400 metres from the road. And the *Bagysh vös'* place is original in that it is directly on the road, fully visible and not connected to one or other village. It is easy to identify it as it is a fenced area with a huge fir tree growing inside.

²³ Observations by Eva Toulouze at the Starokalmiyarovo and Petropavlovka *gurt vös'* on 15/06/2018. While she was sitting in the space reserved to the audience, an acquaintance, a woman from the village living in Bal'zuga, saw her and in order to join her crossed the area where the sacrificial priests were operating.

²⁴ Observations by Eva Toulouze at different ceremonies: 14/06/2013 Alga *mör vös'*, 12/06/2015 Alga *Bagysh vös'*. In the first case, a woman just entered the fenced space to give her offerings, instead of giving them over the fence to a sacrificial priest; in the second case, an elder couple arrived from the road and crossed the fenced area to go through it, instead of walking around it.

Thus, we see that there is no compulsory configuration for the choice of sacred place. Another interesting feature is that a sacred place is easily replaced by another whenever users feel the need to do so. The reason may just be the comfort of those who perform the ceremony. It is enough to transport the ashes of the former fireplace to the new place and consecrate it with a small ritual.

Sacrificial priests

The sacrificial priest is a key character in the revitalisation of ceremonies. Without him, no ceremony may take place. We have a good example of this, but a sad one. There used to be a particular priest for the Keremet ceremonies, distinct from the ordinary priest for the winter and spring ceremonies, called by the name ‘the warden of Lud’ (Udm: Луд утисъ). Most of them have died without transmitting the text of their prayers or finding themselves successors. Thus, this ceremony is alive in only a very small number of locations, for example Votskaya Osh’ya in the Yanaul district of Bashkortostan, and Kipchak in the Kueda district of Perm kray. The condition for revitalising the collective ceremonies is the existence of priests who know their ‘trade’.

Indeed, in Tatyshly district, probably one of the reasons for the very successful revitalisation effort is the existence of such sacrificial priests, who had long experience and were willing to share it and to train new sacrificial priests.

Priests who were active before the revitalisation wave and ensured continuity existed in both village groups, although, of course, none of those who performed in the first half of the 20th century are still alive. In the Vil’gurt group the charismatic personality of Nazip Sadriev dominates (Sadikov & Danilko 2005; Toulouze & Niglas & Vallikivi & Anisimov 2017). Nazip Sadriev was born in 1930. In childhood he started attending religious ceremonies and was confirmed as a helper after WWII. After the war, however, men were scarce, especially adult men who would accept this role in traditional ceremonies. Nazip Sadriev, who was a horse trader and firefighter, was a strong man, very convinced of his righteousness. He started as a sacrificial priest, alongside his elders, when he was 24. He still remembers how his hands trembled the first time (FWM 2013, 2016²⁵).

²⁵ Conversations with Nazip Sadriev, Liivo Niglas and Ranus Sadikov at the former’s home, Malaya Bal’zuga 11/06/2013; conversation with Nazip Sadriev and Ranus Sadikov, 04/06/2016.