

Tradition and Diversity among Udmurt Sacrificial Priests¹

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Abstract: In the Udmurt diaspora of Northern Bashkortostan the traditional Udmurt religion is very much alive and is part of the villagers' everyday lives. Rituals are regularly held both at the village level and in the wider community, composed of several villages, involving the whole population. Since 1990, a revitalisation process has taken place in almost all villages of the region, so that by the beginning of the 2020s, the huge majority of villages have their own ceremonies and their own sacrificial priests, even where the tradition had been interrupted for decades. This article focuses on the key figure in Udmurt ritual, the sacrificial priest, called the *vös'as'*, and attempts to sketch a pattern of function-performance and transmission, taking into account practice in groups of villages. It also reflects on its historical perspective in a Finno-Ugric context in which the practice of ethnic religions is often seen and/or used as a marker of ethnicity.

Keywords: ethnicity, ritual, sacrificial priest, transmission, Udmurt religion

The Udmurt are a people who speak a Finno-Ugric language in the Volga region. Since 1920 most Udmurt have lived in an administrative region called Udmurtia, now a Republic within the Russian Federation. There are also Udmurt communities in neighbouring regions, some of them, the so called Eastern Udmurt, are the descendants of migrants who have settled in Muslim areas since the 17th, and mainly 18th, centuries (Minniyakhmetova 1995: 332; Toulouze, Anisimov 2020). Before the arrival of the Russians, and for some time afterwards, the Udmurt practised an agrarian religion based on animism. Although the Udmurt who remained in their core territory had converted to Orthodoxy by 1765, it is particularly interesting to follow the religious situations in areas where ethnic religions were able to persist without interference until the Soviet period. In Eastern Udmurt villages the traditional animistic religion is still very much alive at the beginning of the 21st century.

As in most traditions, ritual occupies a highly significant place in Udmurt lives. The main output of any ceremonial action was (according to ethnographers²⁾, and is still, the cooking of a porridge made of lamb broth, various grains and lamb meat (see Toulouze 2020a). In some cases the ceremony can be performed by the male head of the family, while in others – important calendar feasts and seasonal agricultural turning points – the ritual is to be led by a specialist. The authors' fieldwork assists in ascertaining what still exists, what has disappeared, what has changed and what is entirely new.

While previous research has mainly focused on reconstruction – attempting to ascertain the details of the rituals before modernity – our goal is to focus on the current practice of this peculiar form of worship, and to analyse how the population understands it. We intend to study a key figure in the perpetuation of the tradition, the sacrificial priest, for in the context of urbanisation and rural exodus transmission is a core question. In a wider context the question of the possible use of ethnic religion as an identity marker and the priest's possible role in this must also be considered.

Very few of these practices have resisted the successive efforts of evangelisation and sovietisation in Udmurtia. As Ranus Sadikov, an Udmurt ethnographer who specialises in the Eastern Udmurt, emphasises, the disruption of the village community by collectivisation has seriously transformed collective life in the countryside, in Udmurtia as well as in the farther-flung Turkic regions (Sadikov 2012: 48). There are still places where tradition has shown itself more resilient. One of these is the Republic of Bashkortostan, where Udmurt peasant communities practice forms of worship as ethnographers described them in the 19th century.

This is easily explained. In Udmurtia the communities had to face evangelisation and then collectivisation – the first imposing a new and enduring way of thinking about oneself in the world, the second revolutionising the way people related to each other in everyday life. In Bashkortostan the first disruptive phase did not take place. The effects of collectivisation were similar in Bashkortostan as elsewhere: the basis of community life changed, and anti-religious ideology was spread through school, the army, and state institutions, while more or less active repression led to the fading of the traditional Udmurt mental world. However, the areas the Bashkortostan Udmurt inhabited were totally rural and remote, and they were able to retain much of their religion. We can also infer that the dominant ethnic layer in Bashkortostan was not Russian, but Turkic (Tatar and Bashkir) and that they were not so unanimously hostile to Udmurt ritual.

Contemporary scholars have emphasised the persistence of Udmurt rituals in this region: Tatiana Minniyakhmetova (1961) and Ranus Sadikov (1973), themselves natives of northern Bashkortostan, have defended doctoral dissertations and written many studies on them in their current forms, and have described rituals in continuity that have created a corpus, based both on fieldwork and on older literature, the main emphasis of which is on the beginning of the 20th century, a period in which tradition was still strong and modernity had not yet penetrated. Nevertheless, external research

on these questions is still practically non-existent. Although Finnish (Kirsti Mäkelä, Seppo Lallukka) and Hungarian researchers (Boglárka Mácsai, Zoltán Nagy) have conducted fieldwork in the region, their findings are still to be published. In the present article we reflect on what we have witnessed, while concentrating on the key role of the sacrificial priest.

Is the Udmurt religion a religion?

As a general introduction, a remark about the name of the Udmurt religion. If we look at what has been published in Udmurtia, among the publications is an important book titled *Udmurt oskon* (“Udmurt faith”, Vladykin, Vinogradov 2010), with a choice of texts, comments and photos. The word ‘oskon’ comes from the Udmurt verb ‘to believe’ and is clearly a term generalised under the influence of Christianity. Another term used more in the context of the traditional religion is *vös’*, a word used to refer to a sacrifice, and also to a sacrificial ceremony in general. It is also the name that has been chosen by the Izhevsk activists for their association. The word *vös’* also provides the basis for many other derivation terms, for example the term for the sacrificial priest, which is the main topic of this article.

The main question we shall now reflect about is the following: is it proper to call what the Udmurt call *Udmurt oskon* or *Udmurt vös’*, a religion? We shall not develop this point, but we would like to pinpoint a terminological confusion that is difficult to unravel because of the lack of proper concepts in our toolbox.

The kind of practice we shall study is usually called ‘paganism’ in Russia. For us, the main problem with the term ‘pagan’ lies in the fact that it was originally used in opposition to ‘Christian’; scholars now prefer to approach the phenomenon from a more neutral starting point. Moreover, the word ‘pagan’ contains other implicit features, probably because of the connection with antique beliefs. These features do not fit the fluid and situative object of

our study, which is not characterised by a developed and fixed mythology, a sophisticated polytheism. However, the term has been integrated into the discourse as an objective scientific category.

We could use the term ‘belief’, which is used both in anthropology and folklore studies as opposed to religion as a formalised and dogmatic system. But ‘belief’ is also somewhat problematic, for it implies the conscious act of believing. In spite of what is suggested by Christianity’s dominance, not every ‘belief system’ is based on belief. A ‘credo’ is rather a peculiarity of monotheistic world religions such as Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Faith and belief are quite improper concepts in many other systems, where the propositional dimension is not articulated into a rigid system. These notions have been imposed on the natives by missionaries, who as professionals could only interpret the unfamiliar by using familiar categories: their thinking habits and their languages did not and do not provide them with appropriate tools to understand the realities they discovered. At the same time, these categories have been accepted and interiorised by the natives themselves (Asad 1993): in contact situations, speaking a language that was not theirs, they domesticated the conceptual tools introduced by the ‘other’. They have become weapons: even if they did not fit theoretically, they could still be pragmatically and advantageously used. This is the case with the Udmurt, who have adopted the term *udmurt vera* (or, also in Udmurt ‘*udmurt oskon*’) which can be directly translated as ‘Udmurt faith’, in contrast to *dzh’uch vera*, ‘Russian faith’ (Orthodox Christianity) and *biger vera*, ‘Tatar faith’ (Islam).

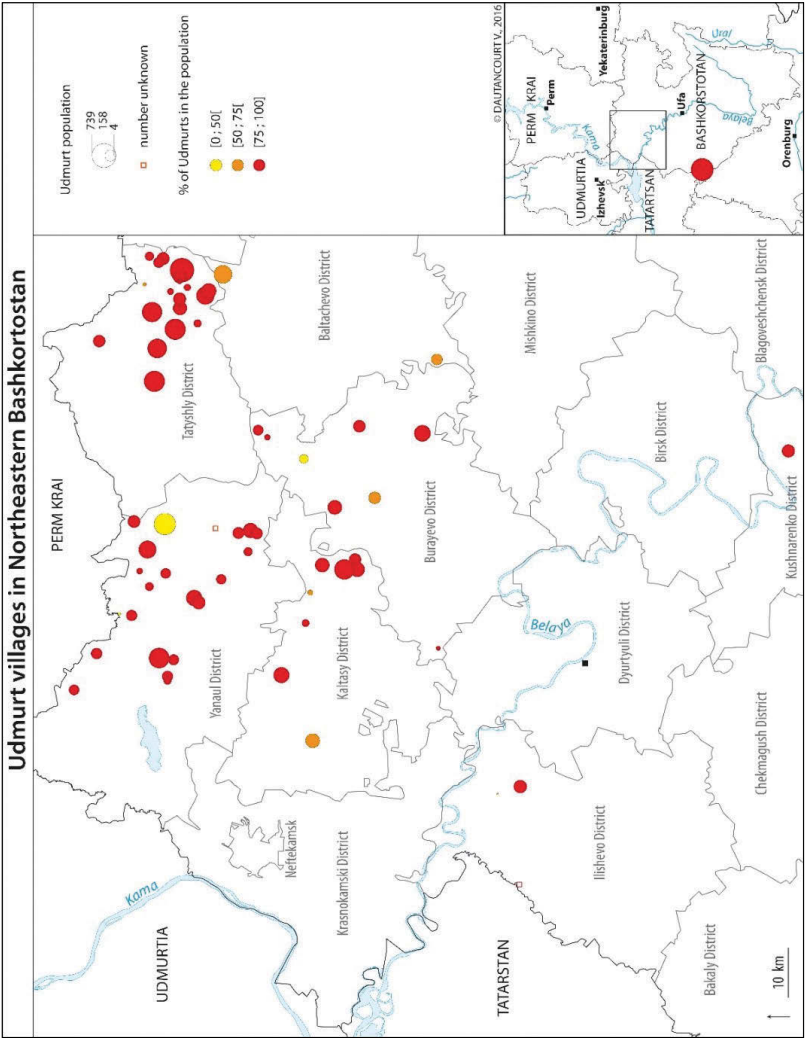
We thus face the challenge of expressing something without the appropriate conceptual tools. We have been tempted by the concept of spirituality, as used by Hann (2007: 387), but even this term is critical and we shall not use it in this article, for the boundary between the spiritual and the profane is somewhat nebulous. Here, moreover, the practice consists in everyday common actions in the countryside – the slaughtering of animals, cooking, and eating, although they are encompassed in a framework that makes

them sacred and gives them place, time, performers, words, and gestures. In conclusion, we are forced to compromise and use the unsatisfactory term 'religion'.

The Udmurt religious world in Bashkortostan at the beginning of the 21st century

In the second decade of the 21st century peasant life in the Udmurt communities of Northern Bashkortostan is still punctuated by religious gatherings. Continuity is clearly felt, as we observed in our fieldwork since June 2013 up to 2020, after which we were not able to do fieldwork due to the corona crisis. We attempted to penetrate the world of Udmurt rituals by attending and filming ceremonies, but also through the mediation of sacrificial priests. We stayed in the Tatyshly district, in Northern Bashkortostan, and worked in several of the area's villages as well as in some villages in other districts. Being acquainted with specialist literature, we could observe some changes, and in this context we observed that many features that once existed have been forgotten. Others have not faded, while some have been revived, and new forms have also been invented. We find thus merged into a single common practice elements with different historical status. A comparison with Udmurt religious practice in Udmurtia itself may provide further insights.

What we have discovered is a bustling and varied world of Eastern Udmurt religious life, where local traditions are dominant and almost all village have different ceremonies. There are some people, especially among local administration workers, who think that the Udmurt religious ceremonies should be standardised following the example of Christianity and Islam (FWM 2014³). In our opinion, the variety in ritual practices manifests the richness and the strength of the tradition, and we shall endeavour to show this in this article.



Map 1. Udmurt villages in Northeastern Bashkortostan.

The traditional religious life of the Eastern Udmurt has been characterised by a complex annual ceremonial cycle. Some of these ceremonies have been forgotten. For example, the Easter ceremony, the *Bydzh'ym nunal* (Great Day) festival,⁴ has very limited importance in Bashkortostan. The tradition is alive only in particular villages, while in other locations it is reduced to scenic reconstructions (FWM⁵ 2018). These reconstructions are usually organised by the Udmurt ethnic organisation, the NKC (National and Cultural Centre, cf. Toulouze, Anisimov 2020), so that people do not forget ceremonies that are no longer widespread in daily life, but which still live in the memories of the elder generations. Another example is the spring three-village ceremony (FWM⁶ 2014). People remember which villages performed it and with whom, but the tradition is no longer alive in some places, while in other places it has undergone transformation. In general, grass-roots ceremonies have been less disrupted by political interference.(FWM⁷ 2013)

The tradition of the village ceremony (*gurt vös'*) during the summer solstice period has generally continued without interruption.⁸ The *mör vös'*, the following ceremony in the summer cycle, one or two weeks after the village event, is observed together by eight to ten villages, and has also been quite resilient. A similar joint ceremony, the *tol mör vös'*, is also held in winter (FWM⁹ 2016) and is the only ceremony of the winter cycle that has been preserved, except one village ceremony, the *gurten vös'* celebrated in Starokalmiyarovo. In many places, the celebration of joint ceremonies, both in summer and winter, was interrupted for some years but was immediately revived when the Soviet Union collapsed. These very public ceremonies are attended by large gatherings, some of the attendants, as our fieldwork reveals, are 'expatriate' Udmurt, i.e. Udmurt who live and work outside the compact Udmurt area but who return for the occasion (FWM 2013¹⁰ and 2019¹¹).

In some areas of Bashkortostan, for example Kaltasy district, where Udmurt village and joint ceremonies had been thoroughly documented at the end of the 19th century (Toulouze 2020a), the

interruption lasted for decades. When the revitalisation process started, there were no informants left who remembered the ceremonies and the prayers precisely (FWM¹² 2018).

Another ceremony had also totally disappeared: the ‘country’ ceremony, *el'en vös*, for which all the Udmurt of Bashkortostan and the Perm region used to gather, was attested to in older literature (Sadikov 2008: 46). It rotated between three villages, Varyash, Kirga, and Altayevo, the only places where its memory has not faded (Sadikov 2008: 194). As no data are available after the beginning of the 20th century, we may assert that by the beginning of the Soviet period it was no longer being held. It has now been revived and has been performed since 2008 in the three villages that hosted it previously (Sadikov 2010: 34), becoming a very popular event, even attracting people from Izhevsk, the capital city of Udmurtia (FWM 2013¹³ and 2018¹⁴).

Having illustrated and sampled the overall framework with these examples from our fieldwork, we shall focus on one key issue. What is the current situation of the specialised bearers of this tradition, the sacrificial priests?¹⁵ Has their role changed, what is it, who are they, how have they become what they are, and how do they perpetuate themselves? Is this role somehow political? These are the concrete questions we shall attempt to answer.

The central role of the sacrificial priest, the *vös'as'*/ *kuris'kis*¹⁶

In the continuation of a tradition, the existence of ‘people who know’ is crucial. In the Udmurt tradition, at the turn of the 20th century the ritual specialists, the *vös'as'*, were responsible for larger ceremonies, while the family head (or elder kin member) could pray in everyday life and at family events (Khrushcheva 1995: 197).¹⁷

Not everybody could perform at public ceremonies. We know of various kinds of priest:

- the leader of the ceremony, the *vös'as'*, was responsible for the whole ceremony and recited the prayers;
- the *tylas'* was responsible for the fireplace and for throwing whatever was supposed to go there into the fire (pieces of bread, blood, bones, entrails);
- and the *partchas'* was responsible for the sacrificial animals and the actual sacrifice (Sadikov 2008: 191).

This task-sharing has now disappeared.¹⁸ We know that until the 1920^s the *vös'as'* was elected by the assembly of the family heads, i.e. the village council, called *ken'esh*,¹⁹ but this is no longer the case. However, in 1928 the *ken'esh* became an enemy for the Soviet authorities as the incarnation of the “kulak’s power”.²⁰ Moreover, especially after the 1930^s, all religious specialists were grouped with Orthodox priests, accused of being exploiters of the people, and repressed. All the local leaders were accused of being kulaks and eliminated. While no statistics are available, it is likely that many *vös'as'* were victims of repression. However, they had a lower public profile than Orthodox priests because they were peasants like everyone else, and so many survived. Thus, after the war, the communities were not totally deprived of their priests.

The main problem lay elsewhere, however, in the younger people, who had been trained by Soviet education in the cult of modernity and material progress and who seldom followed the spiritual traditions of their elders. From this perspective the 1980s and 1990^s were years of decline: the older men who had continued to lead ceremonies died without anybody to replace them. Without a priest, worship might disappear. Even if people wanted to continue, they were not able to do so: “[W]e may say that in the 20th century it is only thanks to the *vös'as'* that the tradition of collective ceremonies was preserved. If the priest had no successors, the holding of sacrifices was interrupted” (Sadikov, Danilko 2005: 230–231).

For this reason we focus on this figure, who is so crucial for the survival of the tradition.

The task of the *vös'as'*

Today the sacrificial priest's tasks are varied. He is the master of ceremonies of a fairly complicated ritual that includes several simultaneous actions. He therefore has assistants. The tasks formerly undertaken by particular priests are now entrusted to these assistants. However, the priest must ensure that everybody acts according to the rules. We shall describe his tasks in the simplest ceremony, the village one.²¹ We have chosen to describe the ceremonial practice in the village of Malaya Bal'zyuga,²² because it is a tradition that has never been interrupted. Nazip Sadriev, known in the community as Nazip *agay*,²³ a sacrificial priest for sixty years who has thoroughly trained his assistants and successor, continued to conduct it until the 2010s.

Before the event the priest organises the gathering of offerings – bread, grain, sacrificial animals, and money, given by all the households of the village. These items are brought to the venue of the ceremony. Every ceremony starts with an opening ritual, the *siz'is'kon*, held on the morning of the main ceremony. Porridge is cooked without meat, and the priest prays to ask permission to make a sacrifice while holding some porridge in a bowl on a towel with some birch²⁴ branches. Then all the people²⁵ eat a spoonful of the ritual porridge. Only then may the preparations for the sacrificial ritual itself start.

During the first prayer two assistants present the sacrificial animal, a lamb. They 'purify' it before the sacrifice, sprinkling it with water using a birch branch. Later, they cut the lamb's throat, also using a sprig of birch, which is cut at the same time as the throat, while another assistant is ready with a spoon to gather the first blood and to throw it into the fire. He repeats this thrice. At the same time, the priest utters a prayer, holding bread baked by the former owners of the sacrificial animal. This bread must have a coin pressed inside it. During the prayer the other assistants kneel and bow when the priest says '*amin*'. Afterwards the sacrificed animal must be skinned and cut into portions.

The priest must then pour salt into the pot. The salt is the first element of the porridge, only then come the other ingredients. While in principle meat should be put into the pot onto the salt, and only then water added, in reality the water is already boiling when the meat is thrown in. At the same time, the grain given by the population must be prepared and the money counted. The meat takes a long time to be cooked. When it is ready, the priest looks for the ritual parts, puts them on a plate,²⁶ and recites a prayer over the plate, holding it as before on a towel and branches. Meanwhile some of the assistants separate the meat from the bones, giving the audience some bones to clean before throwing them on the fire; the meat is then put back into the pots. At the same time, other assistants have placed the grain into the broth and look after the porridge: their task is physically hard as they must stir the porridge in the pots with huge wooden poles until it is ready. Finally, the porridge is distributed to the assembled people, and the priest recites the last prayer in gratitude for the money offerings. When the people have gone home, the fireplaces are 'closed' by sweeping them with the birch or fir branches, then all the utensils must be cleaned and packed away. The remains of the porridge are brought back to the village and the priest distributes it to those who were unable to attend.

This is a complex ritual with many concomitant activities, and it is the sacrificial priest who is responsible for the whole.²⁷

The transmission of knowledge and the choice of priest

With the disruption of the rural community in the 1930^s, it was clearly impossible to maintain this competence in the framework of the furiously anti-religious collective farm. The formerly elected *vös'as'* continued in secret and were solely responsible for the future.

Nazip Sadriev, born in 1930,²⁸ and today the region's most prestigious and famous *vös'as'*, told us how he became a priest. He was

in his twenties and had long been an assistant. One of the *vös'as'* ceased to pray and another died. The remaining *vös'as'* told him: "Now, son, you will pray." "The first time, my hands shook. They decided that it was too soon and postponed it. Next year I passed the test, ... although my hands still shook" (FWM 2013²⁹). He was thus co-opted by a functioning priest, although he had learnt the prayers beforehand by listening to them for a long time and incorporating his elder's experience.

The problem of transmission is a real concern for Nazip *agay* (Sadikov, Danilko 2005: 232). He is today considered the most important specialist to consult in the entire Udmurt diaspora and is often invited to lead ceremonies (Sadikov, Danilko 2005: 232). In the last decade, he has concentrated on teaching younger people to provide the communities with priests. As is to be expected, the results are mixed. With some, he believes, it has not worked. With others, it has worked poorly, and with others adequately.³⁰ There are several preconditions that have to be respected when choosing a future *vös'as'*. Nazip *agay* has been strict about some of these requirements and more flexible about others. As in the past, the future *vös'as'* must be a married man (Lintrop 2002: 44), as must his assistants. They must all be full members of the community (bachelors are not considered 'whole' and cannot be trusted with such responsibility): "The scope of peasant society is to reproduce itself. You cannot be an active member if you have not done all you can to fulfil your aim", explains Sadikov. The second personal criterion is that the person must have an impeccable social profile. Priests are not supposed to drink, they should not smoke and they should be good workers, husbands and fathers.

Although people in the villages marry early, it is much more difficult to find men who do not drink and who are motivated for the task. According to our observations the rule of not smoking is not taken seriously today. Some well-respected and experienced *vös'as'* actually smoke during breaks in the ceremonies, but never inside the sacrificial space (FWM 2013³¹, 2015³² and 2016³³).

The choice is still quite limited. Nazip *agay* therefore ignores some other criteria from earlier times in choosing a *vös'as'*.

For example, one important criterion that should be met, but is often overlooked, is that the priest should have a 'pedigree', i.e. he should come from a family of priests so that there is a sacrificial priest among his ancestors. Therefore, when the revitalisation process started, the local Udmurt leaders looked for people who were kin to former *vös'as'*. Only when no one could be found, or the person did not agree to take over the task of becoming the priest for the village, was the position proposed to people unconnected to families of priests. This is how Salim Shakirov from Novye Tatyshly and Anatoliy Nasipullin in Bol'shoy Kachak became sacrificial priests (see below). Another important criterion for eligibility of becoming a priest is age. According to ethnographic data only those older than forty can be elected a *vös'as'* (Sadikov 2008: 191). Nazip *agay*, who himself started his career as a *vös'as'* at the age of 24, has not insisted on



Photo 1. Nazip Sadriev, elder priest of Malaya Bal'zyuga. On the threshold of his home, showing us how the sacrificial priest used to dress, 8 June 2017. Photo Eva Toulouze.

this age limit. Some years ago, he chose a young man in his late twenties to be his successor in his own village. That is how Fridman Kabipyanyanov became *vös'as'* of the village of Malaya Bal'zyuga.

Young men have also become sacrificial priests in other communities. In December 2013, we attended in Tatyshly district a second religious group's winter prayers. In that group, the collective ceremonies are organised by a special 'head of the ceremony' (*vös'kuz'o*), who in this case was not a sacrificial priest. Not only did he organise all practical aspects of the ceremony (finding sacrificial animals, transportation), but he also appointed the priests who prayed at the ceremonies. As some elder men were ill, he appointed two very young helpers who had been attending and assisting in ceremonies for years, Evgeniy Gayniyarov from Alga, in his late twenties (he was not married at the time) and Yashka, Yakov Fazlyev, from Verkhnebaltachevo, who was in his early thirties and used to look after the horses that carried paraphernalia to the ceremonies. (FWM 2013³⁴) We interpreted this as a manifestation of a discreet but effective staff policy.

How are the candidates trained?

Training 'methods' today very much follow the traditional pedagogical methods of native societies. They do not rely on verbal expression or theoretical knowledge, but on experience and observation (Ingold 2000; Vallikivi 2009). Nazip himself was trained in the natural way, by staying close to sacrificial priests, seeing them performing, and imitating them. He teaches in the same way: the apprentices are close to him and observe what he does. They are then expected to imitate their master.

One of the central aspects of the priest's work is prayer. Every priest has one prayer, whose core is repeated in every situation, while the introduction and/or the conclusion depend on the aim of the prayer and its place in the ritual. According to tradition the priest

had to 'steal' a prayer, which meant that he had to learn it naturally, by hearing it without attempting to memorise it (Sadikov 2008: 192). But very few living priests have learnt their prayers in this way.

Most have learnt them from older people, not orally, but from written texts, or by cutting out clippings from newspapers or journals.³⁵ For example, in 2014 the younger Bal'zyuga vös'as' Fridman gave us two prayers by copying them onto our memory stick from his computer. He had not yet learnt his prayer by heart and read it from a sheet of paper during the ritual (FWM 2014³⁶). Some priests do the same in other villages. Thus, the penetration of written culture can be observed, as it is accepted by leaders of ceremonial life such as Nazip *agay*.

Is the Udmurt prayer thus becoming a written genre? Nothing is less sure, although the written form is the main way that the tradition is transmitted today. It is true that most of the priests now read their prayers during the ceremonies. But it is interesting to follow, for example, Fridman's development as a priest: when we saw him first pray, he read the prayer from a text, but now he has read his prayer so often that he knows it by heart, and even allows himself to improvise. It is exactly what Anatoliy Galikhanov, the authoritative Altayevo sacrificial priest, told us about his experience: he too started by reading, but then when he had mastered the rules of the genre, he composed his prayers himself (FWM 2016³⁷). In any case the output is oral and this will not change. The written text is only a tool on the way to professionalisation. It helps beginners to memorise long prayers that last for several minutes, but it does not change the nature of the praying process.

Prayers are inevitably witnesses of their times, although there is also a huge dimension of stability. People pray to obtain what they need, and these basic needs do not change fundamentally. The Udmurt ask for health for them and for their animals, for fertility for their land, for a good harvest, for good weather. But some needs may change and priests are concerned about whether they are authorised to change old texts. This was the content of

a discussion that the Alga group's main *vös'as'*, Evgeniy Adullin, had with Eva in 2015 (FWM 2015³⁸). An analysis of collected prayers shows that changes have always been introduced. At the beginning of the 20th century, they prayed that their young people would please the Tsar in order to defend the country,³⁹ or they asked God to give them the means to pay taxes to the tsar: "When we must pay tribute to the Great Tsar, give [us] yourself help!"⁴⁰ Of course, with the new conditions after the revolution this kind of demand no longer made sense. In the Soviet period, they prayed for the kolkhoz to become rich,⁴¹ for its livestock to be healthy,⁴² for its machine and combine operators to work with joy.⁴³ Today, the couple of horses needed to transport grain to the thrashing floor⁴⁴, until recently mentioned in prayers, have been replaced by a couple of cars.⁴⁵

Other new demands have emerged, reflecting the concerns of contemporary Udmurt society. Today there is a concern for Udmurt identity. In a socio-political context where specific non-Russian identities are under threat, and vernacular languages practically eliminated from school, the Udmurt have started identifying themselves in prayer: "all your unanimous Udmurt people"; "let in the world spread the glory of the Udmurt"; "let our children protect our Udmurtness". We feel here the concern that with newer generations attachment to Udmurt values could diminish. Other concerns are revealed by new prayers: "let our children listen to their mother and father, let them respect the elders". In former prayers there were no such concerns, but we understand that today's young Udmurt do not differ from other ordinary young people who are not so keen to follow tradition without thinking. The formidable influence of others is to be felt in the request: "Let the Udmurt people never lose its sweet modest customs". In other words, let it resist Russian influence.³⁰ Other prayers ask for protection against drug addiction⁴⁶ or for success in the youngsters' attempts to enter university,⁴⁷ etc.

Perpetuation and transmission: Some portraits of *vös'as'*

The Udmurt sacrificial priests in Northern Bashkortostan are quite different from one another. Their differences illustrate the variety of the ceremonies and the richness of Eastern Udmurt rituals. We have met many of the priests, but we shall concentrate on only a few whom we have recorded in action and in interview. Although we have been working with Udmurt sacrificial priests in various districts of Northern Bashkortostan, most of the following cases come from Tatyshly district, which has been our main area of field-work, although we will move on to those who live in other districts.

Tatyshly district

Today the nineteen Udmurt villages in the compact territory of the Tatyshly district are traditionally divided into two village groups separated by a river, the Yuk. According to the villages where their main joint ceremonies take place, one could be called the Vil'gurt group and the other the Alga group.⁴⁸ Both groups have their own rituals, which are almost parallel. The villages hold their ceremonies on the same day, with the joint ceremonies held on different days (the Vil'gurt group performs its *mör vös'* a week before the Alga group's event) to allow people to visit the other ceremony. The Alga group also performs a slightly more complicated cycle in June and December, because they have not only maintained but developed the principle of the three-village ceremony, with, an eight-village ceremony held one week before the *mör vös'*. Another difference is that in the Alga group the population brings offerings to the ceremony and gives them personally to the *vös'as'*, who receives them with a personal prayer. In Vil'gurt the people put the offerings on a pole themselves.

Thus, the comparison between both *mör vös'* allows us to identify clear differences in ritual performance (although this is not the aim of this paper). What we wish to emphasise here is the persistence of strongly differing local traditions.⁴⁹ We shall only comment on some differences in the role of the *vös'as'*.

Bal'zyuga

Malaya Bal'zyuga is a small village of 240 inhabitants, homogeneously Udmurt (99%), with two priests. One is Nazip Sadriev, who is now 91 and is retired. After sixty years as a priest he kept his wits and was willing to share his knowledge widely for a long time. Today, while his prestige is still high, he shows signs of old age and tiredness. He is an old man full of dignity, with intelligent, benevolent and penetrating eyes. He is the primary tradition bearer and is unhappy to see his disciples neglecting some of the rules he has attempted to teach them. He often does not hesitate to formulate opinions concerning them that we would not dare to repeat. Nazip *agay*⁵⁰ is a real 'old-timer'. He does not recognise much value in other regional practices of prayer ceremonies. Over the river that flows north of Bal'zyuga (400 m from the village), there are villages with slightly different ceremonial practices that resisted for the whole of the Soviet period, but for Nazip they are wrong. He would not disapprove of standardisation of ceremonies, but it would have to happen on his terms (FWM 2017⁵¹).

This reminds us that in traditional society, people are mainly concerned with their own community and are not so much bothered with how others do things. We, the scholars, are interested in comparing different ways of conducting a prayer ceremony, but our informants have very limited knowledge of any other tradition. When we presented our film material to different sacrificial priests, we realised that many of them discovered with interest and curiosity what was happening in neighbouring villages.

Photo 2. Fridman Kabipyranov, the young sacrificial priest of Malaya Bal'zyuga. Malaya Bal'zyuga, 11 June 2013. Photo Eva Toulouze.



Nazip Sadriev has been the living authority in the region on practicing the Udmurt religion. He was even invited to the capital of Udmurtia, Izhevsk, to share his knowledge with his colleagues there. He claims he has trained all the active priests in the region,⁵² and approves more or less of them. His last choice, in his own village, has been to train a young man as his successor. This *vös'as'* is a modest, now 39-year-old man, Fridman, whose grandfather was a *vös'as'*. He is of course married, and has a seventeen-year-old son. Fridman Kabipyranov is a respected member of the rural community: he drinks very moderately and only occasionally, and he does not smoke; he studied music in Izhevsk and is a trained singer and musician who teaches in the music school of the neighbouring village, Novyye Tatyshly. As we mentioned earlier, initially he read his prayer from a text.

For some in the village, it was a mistake to appoint such a young man, and it diminished the gravity of the ceremony, but most were happy to see a young man take this role. Now, after ten years of experience, he knows the prayer by heart and leads the ceremony with confidence. He works with a small team of experienced and skilled helpers, who help him to organise and conduct the ceremony. Fridman has started to pray in more conspicuous ceremonies and is able to give advice and pass on his expertise to those interested in Eastern Udmurt ceremonial practices. In 2016 he was invited, as a representative of the ‘pagan’ Finno-Ugrians, to conduct a prayer ceremony at the Finno-Ugric Congress in 2016, in Lahti, Finland.

Vil’gurt

In Udmurt Vil’gurt means ‘new village’ and it is the Udmurt name of a village called in Russian Novyye Tatyshly, ‘New Tatyshly’, as opposed to ‘Upper Tatyshly’, Verkhniye Tatyshly (the centre of the district). Vil’gurt is a large village of around six hundred inhabitants; its importance is due to it being the headquarters of the agricultural cooperative, the biggest local employer. For many decades the cooperative was led by a charismatic leader, Rinat Galyamshin, who, when he was the *kolkhoz* chairman, created the Udmurt national and cultural centre, which is the equivalent of the local national movement. Later he handed over the post of leader of the enterprise to his son and concentrated until 2015 on the revival of Udmurt identity in the region, taking advantage of his authority and connections. He had then to retire due to ailing health (FWM 2015⁵³) and passed away in 2020. Thus, Vil’gurt has benefited from the strength of its leader, thanks to whom many necessary facilities have been built in the village, including a new prayer house on the local ceremonial ground.⁵⁴

When we started our fieldwork in Vil’gurt, the local press as well as the workers of the cultural centre and local teachers all

acknowledged one *vös'as'* in the village, the retired agricultural worker Salim Shakirov. He made handmade artefacts for sale and had a prosperous household (FWM 2011⁵⁵). Salim was the 'official' priest to whom foreigners were sent, and who performed in ceremonies as ordered by the cooperative.



Photo 3. Salim Shakirov, Novyye Tatyshly's sacrificial priest. *Mör vös'*, 7 June 2013. Photo Eva Toulouze.

He told us that nobody in his family had been a *vös'as'* and that he was chosen because he was a 'virtuous' member of the community.⁵⁶ Nazip confirmed that he had chosen and trained him, and that he was not entirely satisfied with the result (FWM 2013⁵⁷). When asked about his succession, Salim answered without ambiguity that none of the youngsters was interested.

We were a little surprised to discover when we arrived at the Vil'gurt *mör vös'* in June 2013 that Salim was not leading the ceremony, even though he was present. The leading priest, Rais Rafikov, was a simple cooperative retired worker from the village; he led the ceremony very confidently, without hesitation, keeping everything under control. He was the one who prayed the introductory *siz'is'kon* at the opening of the ceremony; in the two following prayers he was accompanied by three other priests (there were four priests, four lambs, and four loaves), among whom was Salim; and the closing prayer was performed by him and Salim. We discovered that the journalists present did not know him at all. He seems to avoid all publicity. However, he has authority, though not unshared, in religious matters. His personality fits the function: he is joyous and quick in his action, and inspires confidence. However, it was Salim who acted as a 'head of the ceremony' or *vös' kuz'o*, and organised the material part of the ceremony. In recent years, especially after Salim's death in 2019, Rais *agay* has acquired a strong reputation of his own.



Photo 4. Rais *agay*,
June 2013. Photo
Eva Toulouze.

Nazip also told us that Rais had learnt his job well, and when he watched the video of the ceremony, he approved of many of the decisions he had taken. Nazip complained, however, that Rais had not thanked him for teaching him. The text of Rais's prayer also differed considerably from Nazip's own prayer. We decided to interview Rais, who lives alone with his wife, a Tatar, in a household that seemed more modest than Salim's (FWM 2013⁵⁸). We learnt that Rais's father was a *vös'as'* and that Rais himself had learnt his prayer properly by standing next to him, according to the old tradition of 'stealing' the prayers. Asked about transmission to younger generations, he answered that he was training his son.

During this interview, we could understand part of the tension between him and Nazip: while the latter considered himself the teacher who had given Rais the opportunity to learn the job, Rais placed more importance on what he had learnt from his father, and was attached to his own prayer. The old master is more dogmatic than his pupils, who, in performing ceremonies in slightly different ways, also follow local tradition.

We also met other sacrificial priests in the field, although we did not spend as much time with them as with those mentioned.

The Alga group

What is important to emphasise is that while the Alga group's people are perhaps less charismatic than Nazip Sadriev, and certainly less spectacular, they also kept ceremonies going during the Soviet period with quite a good transmission rate. In the 1970^s they had a strong *vös'as'*, Islam Armanshin. We know about him because Hungarian scholars visiting this area recorded him, as well as Udmurt linguists (Vikár, Bereczki 1989). So we have a couple of recordings, in which we may appreciate what his younger grandson Vladik Khazimardanov, now sacrificial priest in Verkhne-baltachevo, meant when he said that his grandfather "sang" the prayers (FWM⁵⁹ 2015). Indeed, he has a chanting intonation when

praying. Vladik's elder brother Boris is also a sacrificial priest. He started much later, after 2016, and is the sacrificial priest at the village of Staryy Kyzyl-Yar.

The main *vös'as'* in the Alga group of villages is Evgeniy Adullin, who works as the main bookkeeper of the *Rassvet* cooperative, based in Nizhnebaltachevo, where he lives. So Evgeniy has a solid legacy on which to rely. He was given the title 'Great' sacrificial priest (*badzh'ym vös'as'*) and is the main authority in the Alga group. He is the one who in 2013 ordered, on the behalf of the agricultural enterprise, about two dozen frocks for the sacrificial priests, remembering the traditional costume, today mainly disappeared. Evgeniy can also be called to perform outside ordinary ceremonies, for particular events. For example, in June 2013 he led a ceremony with a small staff of volunteers in the little village of Utar-Elga that celebrated the 'Day of the Village', offering a lamb in order to have a sacrifice.



Photo 5. Evgeniy Adullin, Great *vös'as'* of the Alga group. Nizhnebaltachevo village ceremony, 3 June 2016. Photo Eva Toulouze.



Photo 6. Farkhulla (Garifulla) Garifanov, main organiser of the Alga group. Nizhnebaltachevo, 5 June 2016. Photo Eva Toulouze.

What is still characteristic of the way the Alga group's ceremonies are led is that Evgeniy is very efficiently supported by the head of the ceremony, the *vös'kuz'o*, Farkhulla Garifanov. He is an older man who is not a priest, but seems to be a knowledgeable and practical guardian of tradition. He is a former village head and has clear authority. He materially organises all the ceremonies meaning that Evgeniy has only to perform his own role, which is to pray and to give all the signals connected with the ceremonial activities. Farkhulla prepares background elements such as having the grass cut, having the logs ready to make the fire, making sure the sacrificial animals are in the right place, etc. He is also in charge of 'promoting' sacrificial priests: if one of the appointed *vös'as'* is absent, he decides who will pray in his stead. There is always someone to fulfil the role of a *vös'kuz'o*, but in many cases it is the sacrificial priest, as in Bal'zyuga. So, *vös'as'* and *vös'kuz'o*

exercise two distinct functions, although sometimes these are concentrated in the same person, but sometimes shared between two villagers as in the Alga group. Farkhulla is a passionate leader who sees that rules are respected. He orders children who attend ceremonies in shorts to go home and change into proper clothes, or sends away women who enter the sacred space (FWM 2016⁶⁰). He knows everybody in the Alga group of villages and is in the best position to identify possible future leaders.

Aribash and Vyazovka

In Tatyshly district there are many other sacrificial priests. An interesting case is that of the village of Aribash, which belongs to the Vil'gurt group. The sacrificial priest of the village is Aleksey Garaev, who has interesting memories of his youth that encouraged him to be active in the ceremonial life of the village. For instance, he remembers an interesting small detail vividly: when the porridge was ready,



Photo 7. Aleksey Garaev, the sacrificial priest of Aribash, at the village ceremony 5 June 2015. Photo Eva Toulouze.

young men rode into the village calling everybody to the ceremony. This detail was reported at the end of the 19th century by Finnish ethnographer Yrjö Wichmann in the village of Bol'shekachakovo (Sadikov, Mäkelä 2008).

What distinguishes him from other priests is that an important role in his ceremonial activities is played by his wife Liliya. She is from another village, where she was brought up by a quite traditional grandmother who taught her lots of things about her culture. Liliya is an intellectual who writes in the local Udmurt paper and is the author of many short prose texts (FWM 2014⁶¹).

Liliya has been of the utmost importance for Aleksey because of her support and practical help. During the village ceremony, she helps him dress, a detail we have not noticed in any other ceremony (FWM⁶² 2015). The Aribash ceremony also presents another peculiarity in that the place's agency seems to dictate the ritual.



Photo 8. Aleksey Garaev, the sacrificial priest of Aribash and his wife Liliya at the village ceremony 5 June 2015. Photo Eva Toulouze.

As the Aribash people have chosen to hold their village ceremony in a former *lud*, many features of the *lud*⁶³ cult have been taken on, for example the male character of the ceremony (only rams are sacrificed, only men attend) and the use of flat bread *kuar n'an'*. So we do not know whether this custom of helping her husband dress is also connected to the *lud* cult, although in the other ceremony of this cult that we attended in Votskaya Osh'ya this kind of act was not noticed.

In Tatyshly district there are other sacrificial priests who have their own peculiarities. For example, the priest in the village of Vyazovka, Filarit Shaymardanov, is the only one in the district to pray in the traditional garment that was formerly worn not only by the priests, but also by all the people, both men and women, who attended the ceremony (FWM⁶⁴ 2013). This whitish home-spun *sarafan*-type garment is called *shortderem*. Nazip Sadriev and Filaret are the last to have a *shortderem*, along with some elder women.



Photo 9. Filarit Shaymardanov, Vyazovka's sacrificial priest. Vyazovka village ceremony, 7 June 2017. Photo Eva Toulouze.

This garment's fate is not to be transmitted to the next sacrificial priest, but to be used as a deceased priest's mortuary clothing. Therefore, most *shortderems* have disappeared. As the priests were supposed to be dressed in white they used, throughout the Soviet period, an ordinary white household or medical frock. Only at the beginning of the 21st century did sacrificial priests feel the need for something more solemn, more aesthetic, than ordinary white frocks, and started to add different patterns.

Certainly, Tatyshly district is well-known as the centre of the Udmurt revitalisation process, although this does not mean that there is nothing elsewhere. Some of the most authoritative priests among the Eastern Udmurt are to be found in other districts. We shall now take three examples of priests from three different districts. They are all sacrificial priests who have impressed us with their exceptional personality and local peculiarities of ritual practice.

Baltachevo district

In Baltachevo district there are two Udmurt villages, both very active in their religious practice. Although we have met both sacrificial priests, we have not yet been able to attend Kizganbashevo's ceremonies yet. However, we were able to visit Asavka's priest and his ceremonies several times. Let us focus on him.

Vladimir Galiyev is among those whom we may call the 'younger' priests, although he is not exceptionally young, being born in 1971. He is a freelance construction worker, who often has to work far from home in order to feed his family of six children.⁶⁵ Of the priests we have met he is certainly the most concerned with the spiritual dimension of his task. He was appointed by the village elders when the previous priest decided to retire. Vladimir is permanently in touch with both of them.



Photo 10. Vladimir Galiyev, Asavka's sacrificial priest. At his home, 8 June 2016. Photo Eva Toulouze.

Vladimir was surprised and disturbed when he discovered that the prayers were mainly dedicated to asking the gods for benefits, and that there was never an expression of human gratitude. He discussed this with the elders, who agreed to his wish to add some parts at the beginning of the prayer he reads thanking the supreme God Inmar for the Sun, the Moon, the trees, the birds, etc.⁶⁶ So, in his discreet ways, Vladimir is also an innovator; in addition to which he is a bright, luminous personality (FWM⁶⁷ 2016).

Kaltasy district

The Kaltasy district is particularly interesting, for it reveals the failure of research to follow the rituals through time. The village, today called Bol'shekachakovo, known in literature as Badzh'ym

Kachak, was visited in 1884 and 1895 by two Finnish researchers, Aksel Heikel and, more important, Yrjö Wichmann, who spent one full month in the village, describing the contemporary religious life of the village, in which there were many deities and many more ceremonies (Toulouze 2020a).

Thus we know much of how the village lived in 1895, although except Wichmann literature tells us nothing. During the 20th century no scholar visited this village, at least no scholar we know of. Of course, the subjects we are interested in here were not acceptable topics for research in the Soviet period. So we know what happened in the village thanks to the remembrances of the inhabitants, collected by Kirsi Mäkelä in 2008 (Mäkelä-Hafeez 2015). We thus know that by the 1960^s the traditional ceremonies had disappeared. The places of the cult of *lud* were destroyed and the trees cut during the Second World War, although some sacred places remained intact throughout the Soviet period. At the beginning of the 1990^s the ceremonies were revived and they now live their normal lives.

The present priest of the village, Anatoliy Nasipullin, is a retired schoolteacher (FWM⁶⁸ 2018). Although he does not come from a family of priests, he is highly respected in the village. He is deeply interested in traditional Udmurt culture and sings with great pleasure songs he has collected in his village. The Kaltasy people present some differences in the keeping of tradition in comparison with the other Bashkortostan Udmurt: while in other places the ceremonies are done strictly by men, here women are as active as men. This can be disturbing for other priests, for example when they are praying together with Anatoliy's team at the *el'en vös'*. But Anatoliy finds it normal that women are active as his helpers, for the majority of the people who attend the ceremonies are women. He has not yet memorised his prayer and reads it from a handwritten text.



Photo 11. Anatoliy Nasipullin, Bol'shekachakovo sacrificial priest. At the promise of a sacrifice, *siz'is'kon*. Bol'shekachakovo, 20 June 2018.

Photo Eva Toulouze.

Burayevo district

There are several Udmurt villages in Burayevo district. In one of them, Kissa (Kasiyarovo) the ceremonies were long discontinued because of the death of the priest in the 1980^s. The situation was particularly sad because the old priest had carefully prepared his succession, and chosen two younger men to whom he transmitted his knowledge. But they did not take over the task, and the ceremonies were restarted only 15 years later, under pressure from the local population⁶⁹.

There is another village in the district which is also a centre of Udmurt religious activity in Bashkortostan. The peculiarity of Altayevo is that it was one of the three locations where the *el'en vös'* ceremony was organised. It was also the reason, allegedly, why it was revitalised. The population remembered that this ceremony

took place. One of the most authoritative sacrificial priests among the Eastern Udmurt is Anatoliy Galikhanov. He lives in the village, but his brother, Kasim, is an architect and graphic artist who lives in Izhevsk. Kasim has been most active in the Udmurt capital in revitalising there the Udmurt religion, and had even prepared a project for an Udmurt sanctuary in the city – a project that was finally refused by the authorities (FWM⁷⁰ 2019). The idea of revitalising *el'en vös'* was most probably a Galikhanov family initiative. Kasim could mobilise the Izhevsk association of Eastern Udmurt and has the support of his brother.



Photo 12. Anatoliy Galikhanov, Altayevo's sacrificial priest. Altayevo, meeting of the *vös'ken'esh*, a gathering of elder men who decide on ceremonial life, 6 June 2016. Photo Eva Toulouze.

In Altayevo the main ceremonies were almost continuously preserved. Anatoliy mentions that they could have been interrupted for one or two years, but he is sure that the interval between two *vös'* was never three years, because after such a break they would have closed the ceremony.⁷¹ During the Soviet period, they had to ask for permission to hold the ceremony and, according to Anatoliy's words, the *kolkhoz* always gave the necessary ewe for sacrifice. They never had problems with Communist Party officials. Anatoliy was elected as a *vös'as'* in 2010 at an ordinary village meeting held in spring to discuss all kinds of practical problems. The previous *vös'as'* decided to give over the task to a younger man, and he was proposed. During his training by the former priests, Sharifgali *agay* and Salimyan Mardanov, he also addressed Nazip Sadriev, who was quite happy with him, and found him gracious enough to recognise his teaching and to thank him for it (FWM⁷² 2013). At the beginning he also read his prayer from paper, but acknowledged that reading is not a proper way of praying. The prayer should come from inside because God does not understand words, words are for people, he says. But God understands the metaphors and the soul of the people. Anatoliy was given a prayer by his predecessor. He later developed it himself, and he has continued to produce prayers of his own.

The last aspect we wish to emphasise concerning Anatoliy Galikhanov is that he has a particular profile among all the *vös'as'*. He has a vocation to be a public person and has invested in the field of social media. He has his own page on the *Vkontakte* social network, where he shares his texts and his ideas and gives recommendations, telling people what is allowed and what is forbidden according to traditional rules. Thus, he also has a certain influence in educating people, for what he posts is certainly followed and accepted as the word of an authority.



Screenshots 1 and 2. Anatoliy Galikhanov's social media pages, 2 May 2021.
Photo Eva Toulouze.

The *vös'as'* as a political leader?

If we examine the Eastern Udmurt situation within the regional context and extend our observations to other Finno-Ugric communities in the region, we can observe that traditional religions are often used as a powerful ethnic marker (Luehrmann 2011: 42; Leete, Shabaev 2010; Alybina 2014: 90–91). This is particularly true of the Mari in Mari El Republic. The Mari are the least Christianised of the Volga Finno-Ugric peoples: their religious identity proved most resistant to forced evangelisation, and after the collapse of the Soviet Union the ethnic Mari religion has been powerfully revived (in 2004 19.4 % of the Mari considered themselves followers of the Mari religion in more or less syncretistic ways – Sharov 2007: 175). The public discourse around this is thoroughly connected with national identity (Alybina 2014: 91). This is not the case among the Udmurt. In Udmurtia there are only a few villages in which the ethnic religion has been preserved without explicit Christian interference (this does not exclude indirect influence from the general environment, while all over the country there are other manifestations of syncretism in the people's religious practices), and these are seen more as a curiosity than as a lighthouse for Udmurt ethnicity.

Although the Mari religion has been institutionalised in Mari El,⁷³ with publications, new rituals, and a strong hierarchy including sacrificial priests (Alybina 2014: 92, 98–99), in Bashkortostan the political and identity dimension seems to be reduced to the more or less emotional feelings of particular *vös'as'*, and it never appears in public discourse. Even at the Congress of the Udmurt National Cultural Centre, in November 2015,⁷⁴ no mention was made of religious practice during the entire day the congress lasted, and few priests attended. Their absence shows the almost total disconnection of religious activity from the Udmurt national movement in this area.

The Bashkortostan ceremonies are not accompanied by any public or personal ideological discourse. While analysis clearly shows that they are probably now the only place where communication in Udmurt is guaranteed (because of the rise in mixed marriages the minority language may no longer be dominant in the family), and thus might be a strong pillar of Udmurt identity, it does not seem to act as such, at least for now. When asked why these ceremonies are important, both sacrificial priests and the lay population simply emphasise the 'natural' link to what the ancestors did: things have to be done in certain way because it is how they have always been done. When asked what happens if one does not attend the ceremonies, answers are hesitant. People look for examples of misfortune affecting lazy adherents, and usually find them, but this is a reflection of their desire to please the interviewer. This question does not seem relevant: tradition is self-justified, without the need to give any foundation through rational argument.

This is a strength, but also a weakness that can in the dangerously near future threaten the very existence of this religious practice. It is a strength because it is an intrinsic part of life that is taken for granted. Even where it is the result of revival or of a recent construction, the aim is to put things right and re-establish order and balance where there was chaos. No additional ideological meanings are added in the process. This does not mean that the revivers do not intend to enhance ethnic awareness. Usually the impulse for revival comes from the centre: its *primus motor* is often the head of the local agricultural cooperative. For example, long-term director of Demen *kolkhoz*, Rinat Galyamshin, who later founded the Udmurt national and cultural centre in the district, initiated the building of prayer houses, the fencing of the sacred places (a new feature in the tradition) and even influenced the content of some village ceremonies. He had companions in different districts who acted likewise in order to revitalise religious practice: they usually asked a respected older man, somebody active in local politics, to

fetch an older sacrificial priest or his sons and tell them to officiate again, even after breaks of years or decades. When people are told by influential personalities to organise ceremonies they are obedient, and traditions have thus been started everywhere. In some places, local activists have taken over and devoted themselves to these activities (for example the Garayev couple in Aribash). In others, the involvement has been more mechanical, but the response from the population is unanimously positive, and the new ceremonies have quickly taken root and are massively attended.

Considering the importance of collective prayer ceremonies for the Eastern Udmurt, as well as the dangers to their identity in today's world, it is surprising that this religious revival movement has not been tied to an explicit ethnic ideology. However, this might be changing. As demonstrated above, the emergence of the 'Udmurt topic' is clearly visible in the activities and prayers of Anatoliy Galikhanov, who is the priest of Altayevo village and the man behind the revival of *el'en vös'*, although other sacrificial priests have so far been reluctant to stress an ethnic and political dimension in their ceremonial practices. Only the priests of the Alga group have started using some of the Galikhanov's formulas in their prayers, although they are, at the moment, the only ones.

The lack of an ideological background supporting and accompanying ceremonial activity can be a weakness: if the situation becomes critical, there will be no supporting mental framework to maintain it. The language situation, while still very comforting in terms of minority language use and preservation, is already wavering: young Udmurt couples leaving their home area to look for work in other more industrial regions find themselves in the midst of the Russian population and start speaking Russian to their children, even though Udmurt is their mother tongue. They are not supported by an ethnic ideology that will motivate them to raise their children bilingually or multilingually. We therefore have the impression that the situation is aptly comparable to the position of

Animism in the face of Christianity or Islam: it is weak, because of the lack of a strong dogma that can withstand pervasive ideologies.

The reluctance to turn Udmurt religion into something more ideological and dogmatic is manifested in the failed attempts to standardise ceremonial practices in the manner of Christianity and Islam. In 2015, there was an attempt to create a coordinating instance of the sacrificial priests of the Eastern Udmurt by the Association of the Eastern Udmurt in Izhevsk. Ultimately, nothing came of the idea because there was permanent tension between the leadership of the association and the head of the Udmurt national movement in Bashkortostan.

At the same time, or even a little earlier, Udmurt civil servants working in Tatyshly district administration, emerged with the idea that a standardisation was long overdue. Taking as a model the world religions Islam and Christianity, these administration workers launched a plan according to which the Eastern Udmurt all had to pray using the same text. They did not go very far with their project, which clearly received no support from the people concerned that the administration was disconnected from the sacrificial priests and did not themselves attend ceremonies. They also received more than critical opinions from the scholars whom they addressed for advice (FWM⁷⁵ 2014). At that time the process was stopped.

The attempt to standardise ceremonial practises was resumed later, when the Udmurt leader had changed. The new head of the Udmurt movement in Bashkortostan, took over the initiative and called a meeting of the *vös'as'* in January 2019 (FWM⁷⁶ 2019). The situation seemed to be ripe and a coordinating association was created. But so far it has not attempted to establish any standards for collective prayer ceremonies. The association of sacrificial priests remains, for the time being, just a coordination forum where priests can discuss their concerns and coordinate the dates of their ceremonies.

Conclusion

This short overview is an attempt to decipher the present state of the spiritual world of the Bashkortostan Udmurt, who have been more successful than others in Russia in preserving their old values. Their keeping of their ritual traditions is not led, as our examples show, by a desire to reproduce precisely ancient practices that have disappeared. Even the most conservative of activists, such as Nazip Sadriev, acknowledge that things change and seek in their own practice to ensure the vitality of the whole system rather than to reproduce it mechanically. The differences among *vös'as'*, even on the small scale we chose, reveal real tensions and problems as in all human communities, as well as different ways to be *vös'as'* and to set ceremonial practices. We can therefore argue that the system is vibrant and that its diversity is its strength, and the presence of younger men among those chosen suggests there is a future for these forms of worship.

In conclusion, we have examined here a core problem in the practice of religion: the role of the key figure in ritual, with his abilities and knowledge, and how this role is transmitted to younger generations. The *vös'as'* is an entirely ordinary member of the village community, who is respected and considered 'virtuous' and who takes upon himself the organisation of the community's ritual life. The transmission of this role is possible because being a *vös'as'* is something that can be learnt and does not require, at least today, peculiar features or extraordinary knowledge. It is facilitated by the position of the elders in charge of transmission, who have chosen to encourage young people to act as religious leaders. It seems a reasonable adaptation in the wider social context where youth is increasingly challenging old age for prestige in society. However, unlike in other nearby regions, their role as leaders is merely religious, and has no political implications, at least for now.

The elders responsible for Udmurt religion in Bashkortostan have chosen the most reasonable path to allow their religion to be preserved. Nevertheless, the challenges are not in practice itself, but in its context. The Udmurt religion is thoroughly connected to rural life, while rural life itself is threatened by modern ways, by a set of values that relegate the rural to the bottom of the social socle. Today, even in the remote villages that are involved in these community rituals, the younger generation is computer and town-oriented and shares networks and entertainments with youngsters all over the world. Will they remain in the village, or will they return to marry and become members of the community, allowing it to thrive? Moreover, the traditional structure of village life is being shattered. In some parts of the country this collapse took place two decades ago. Here the collective farms were successful at the end of the Soviet era, and have been replaced by cooperatives that reproduce the previous model quite closely. While these cooperatives have been able for some years to adapt to a market economy and have achieved good productivity, this well-being is seriously threatened. What will happen if the cooperative fails? It will be important to follow the viability of rural life if the chances of this unique religious practice surviving are to be assessed.

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Notes

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- ² Among others, Pervukhin 1888, Holmberg 1914.
- ³ Conversations with Salim Garifullin in Verkhniye Tatyshly, Tatyshly district, Bashkortostan with ET, LV LN and NA.
- ⁴ The Mari have the same kind of holiday, also called the ‘Great Day’ (*kugu keche*), corresponding to the Easter period. Its absence or lesser resilience in Bashkortostan may be connected to the absence of Christianity in the area (there was no church whatsoever in the Tatyshly district until 2018, when an orthodox church was built in its centre, Verkhniye Tatyshly). There are memories of the existence of *badzh’ym nunal*, but it has lost its significance. According to our main informant people used to gather and eat porridge in groups of three or four families; today, when something happens, the celebration is limited to one family, without outsiders, with the head of the family saying ritual words over the porridge.
- ⁵ Event in Banibash, Yanaul district Bashkortostan, recorded by ET.
- ⁶ Recorded from Nazip Sadriev, in Malaya Bal’zyuga, Tatyshly district Bashkortostan, by ET, LN, and LV.
- ⁷ However, people still recall a time when party officials interrupted the ceremony and the contents of the sacrificial cauldrons were thrown on the ground. This did not affect the practice as the inhabitants of the village simply changed the location of the ceremony to more hidden places. Conversations with Nazip Sadriev, Flyura Nuriyeva, in Malaya Bal’zyuga, recorded by ET, LN, RS.
- ⁸ This is true of the spring cycle. In winter, it is the village ceremony that has disappeared, while the collective ones are still performed.
- ⁹ Recorded in Novyye Tatyshly, Tatyshly district, Bashkortostan, by ET, LN, NA, RS.
- ¹⁰ Conversation with a woman living in Yekaterinburg, at the *mör vös’* 2013, Novyye Tatyshly, Tatyshly district, Bashkortostan, by ET.
- ¹¹ Conversation with an Udmurt dentist living in Krasnodar, Kaymashabash *yshtiyak vös’*, Yanaul district, Bashkortostan, by ET.

- ¹² Conversation with Anatoliy Nasipullin, Bol'shekachakovo, Kaltasy district, with ET and RS.
- ¹³ *El'en vös'*, Kirga, Kuyeda district, Perm krai, recorded by ET, LN.
- ¹⁴ *El'en vös'*, Staryy Varyash, Yanaul district, Bashkortostan, recorded by ET, EB.
- ¹⁵ We use here the expression introduced by Aado Lintrop (Lintrop 2003).
- ¹⁶ These two words are synonymous, with a use more or less local. The word *kuris'kis* comes from the verb 'to ask' and its derivate, to pray. The *kuris'kis* is the one who prays.
- ¹⁷ This is still the case. Although it is not the focus of this article, let us mention an event that happened during our fieldwork: Tolya, the son of our host's neighbour was called up, and was to leave on 25th June very early in the morning. The celebration started in the evening, and at about 4 am the father prayed for his son and a ritual porridge was distributed to those who attended (FWM 2013: recorded from Flyura Nuriyeva, in Malaya Bal'zyuga, Tatyshly district, Bashkortostan, by ET and LN).
- ¹⁸ We heard the word *partchas* only once, in the mouth of the older *vös'as*, Nazip, who used it to mean 'assistant'. Ranus Sadikov, who has spent years studying the Udmurt religion, reacted to this word, for it was the first time he had heard it in current speech.
- ¹⁹ This is what Khrushcheva asserts (1995: 197). Lintrop argues that, with reference to Udmurtia, in former times the *tuno*, or wizard, used to appoint the fore-prayers; now the vacant places are filled through a vote (Lintrop 1995: 271).
- ²⁰ The Udmurt word *ken'esh* was used in the 1920s for the Russian 'Soviet' until it became taboo, and the institution was abolished. There is abundant literature on this issue, especially by Galina Nikitina (1993, 1998).
- ²¹ Our description is based on our observation and video recording of the Malaya Bal'zyuga *gurt vös'* in 2014 (see Niglas 2019b). FWM 2014, recorded by LN, ET, LV.
- ²² Although we have also attended other village ceremonies, for example in 2014 (Urazgil'dy: LN, ET, LV), 2015 (Aribash: ET, RS), 2016 (Nizhnebaltachevo ET, RS, NA), 2017 (Vyazovka: LN, RS, LV, NA, ET), 2018 (Starokalmiyarovo ET), and 2019 (Yuda EB and Verhnebaltachevo ET, LN, LV). Some of these ceremonies have been kept quite traditional, while others have either been revived in a more elementary shape (Urazgil'dy) or merged with another form of ceremony, for example the *keremet vös'* (Aribash).

- ²³ *Agay* is an honorific title given to older men, meaning in Udmurt 'brother', 'uncle'.
- ²⁴ The branches used in the ceremonies differ according to the season: in spring and summer they are birch, in winter, fir. Whenever branches are used, the season determines which tree they are taken from.
- ²⁵ Usually, at this stage, only assistants – and anthropologists – are concerned.
- ²⁶ Some particular parts of the animal – the heart, the head, the liver, a right rib, and the right fore thigh – have previously been marked and will be used in the next prayer.
- ²⁷ We have published an ethnography describing the proceedings at an Udmurt ceremony in full (Toulouze, Niglas 2014).
- ²⁸ He worked with horses in the local agricultural cooperative, or *kolkhoz*, and never left his village, where he married and had five children (Sadikov, Danilko 2005: 229; Toulouze et al. 2015)
- ²⁹ Conversation with Nazip Sadriev: ET, LN, and RS.
- ³⁰ Actually, his assessment is based on what he considers to be the only right way to act. However, in parallel to his tradition there are other competing traditions: in the neighbouring area of Alga ceremonies vary in detail, Nazip *agay* considers them erroneous, while for the local priests they correspond to their local traditions. FWM 2013: ET, LN, and RS.
- ³¹ Observations at the Alga *mör vös'*, Tatyshly district, Bashkortostan, December 2013, by ET, LN.
- ³² Observations at the *Bagysh vös'*, Kyzyl Yar road, Tatyshly district, Bashkortostan, by ET, RS.
- ³³ Observations at the Nizhnee Baltachevo *gurt vös'*, ET, NA, RS.
- ³⁴ Alga *tol mör vös'* December 2013: ET, LN.
- ³⁵ In the 1990^s and 2000^s prayers were published in the local press.
- ³⁶ Malaya Bal'zyuga *gurt vös'*, by ET, LN, LV.
- ³⁷ Conversation with A. Galikhanov, Altayevo, Burayevo district, Bashkortostan, ET, NA, RS.
- ³⁸ Conversation at the *Bagysh vös'*, Kyzyl Yar road, Tatyshly district, Bashkortostan, by ET, RS.
- ³⁹ Prayer recorded on June 25 1971 in Kalmiyar (Kueda district, Perm region) by Mikhail Atamanov from former priest Zidiyar Suyushev

(b. 1916). NOA UdIIYaL UrO RAN. Manuscripts. Manuscripts. Inventory 2-N. Dossier 439. Sheet 33–34. Clearly, this text is from the informant's remembrances.

⁴⁰ Text collected in 1885 by Bernát Munkácsi, in Mozhga, from 'uncle' Apshivyr. Munkácsi 1887: 168; another prayer with the same request was collected by Munkácsi in 1916 in a prisoner's camp in Esztergom, from Muradshin Mardymsha and Dzhandusov Akmadysa from Urzagil'de. Munkácsi 1952: 111–114.

⁴¹ Text collected in Asavka (Baltachevo district) by M. Garifullin in 1992, from Minnigali Ziyangarov (b. 1920) (Garifullin 1992: 456–459).

⁴² Text collected in Bolshetuganeevo (Kaltasy district) in 2003 by Yantimir Minlyakhmetov (Sadikov 2011: 125–129).

⁴³ Text collected in 2006 by S. Baymetova, student of Bol'shekachakovo high school, from Sabyr Fayzrakhmanov (Sadikov 2011: 129–132).

⁴⁴ For example Prayer by Salim Shakirov 2009 (Shakirov 2009).

⁴⁵ The 2019 version of the Alga group prayers (Tatyshly district).

⁴⁶ Text collected in 1994 by journalist A. Grebina from priest Anatoliy Galikhanov (b. 1962), Altayevo (Burayevo district).

⁴⁷ Prayer by Anatoliy Galikhanov (b. 1962), Altayevo (Burayevo district), recorded during the *el'en vös'* in 2013 (see Niglas 2019a).

⁴⁸ We call them this for the purposes of this article, but these are not recognised names.

⁴⁹ The acknowledgement of these peculiarities has led us to a long-term project, which is to record all nineteen village ceremonies, so that we do not involuntarily become the means of standardising the ceremonies according to those we have already recorded and left as DVDs with the sacrificial priests.

⁵⁰ He has already been presented in an article (Danilko, Sadikov 2005).

⁵¹ Conversation with Nazip Sadriev, in Malaya Bal'zyuga by RS, ET, LV, NA.

⁵² Nevertheless, this assertion is probably only partly justified. At least two of the priests we have interviewed did not mention Nazip *agay* as having played any part in their training: one learnt from his father, the other from his grandfather.

⁵³ Congress of the Bashkortostan Udmurt November 2015, by ET, LN, RS.

- ⁵⁴ He also built a mosque in the village, although there are only a few Muslims in the area, showing that he is quite able to exploit the political context.
- ⁵⁵ Meeting with Salim Shakirov, Novye Tatyshly, Tatyshly district, Bashkortostan, August 2011, ET, MM.
- ⁵⁶ We do not yet have enough insights into local society to appreciate the degree of tension that might be connected with being or not being virtuous.
- ⁵⁷ Conversation with Nasip Sadriev, Malaya Bal'zyga, Tatyshly district, Bashkortostan, ET, LN, RS.
- ⁵⁸ Conversation with Rais Rafikov, Novye Tatyshly, Tatyshly district, Bashkortostan, by ET, LN, RS.
- ⁵⁹ Conversation at the *Bagysh vös'*, Kyzyl Yar road, Tatyshly district, Bashkortostan, by ET, RS.
- ⁶⁰ Observations at the Nizhnee Baltachevo *gurt vös'*, ET, NA, RS.
- ⁶¹ Meeting with Lilya Garaeva, Aribash, Tatyshly district, Bashkortostan, ET, LN, LV.
- ⁶² Aribash *gurt vös'*, Tatyshly district, Bashkortostan, ET, RS.
- ⁶³ *Lud* is a sacred grove that is usually fenced. *Lud* or *Keremet* is an Udmurt deity, allegedly of Turkic origin. It was an all-male cult.
- ⁶⁴ *Mör vös'* in Novye Tatyshly. Conversation with Filarit, ET.
- ⁶⁵ We can also add that among his children, his daughter Viktoriya, after a period as a teenager when she was attracted by all that was Tatar or Russian, is now an inspired activist for Udmurt culture.
- ⁶⁶ We might here identify a Christian influence, which Vladimir is probably not fully aware of.
- ⁶⁷ Conversation with Vladimir Galiev, Asavka, Baltachevo district, by ET, NA, RS.
- ⁶⁸ Conversation with Anatoliy Nasipullin, Bol'shekachakovo, Kaltasy district, Bashkortostan, ET, RS. Later, the same year, several meetings at Bol'shekachakovo ceremonies and at *el'en vös'* with ET.
- ⁶⁹ Oral information by Ranus Sadikov.
- ⁷⁰ Conversation with Y. Yagupov, Izhevsk, Udmurtia, ET, NA, LV.

- ⁷¹ Meaning they would have performed a special ceremony to declare that the *vös*' would no longer be performed. FWM: Conversation in Altayevo, Burayevo district, Bashkortostan, ET, NA, RS.
- ⁷² Conversation with Nazip Sadriev, Malaya Bal'zyuga, Tatyshly district, Bashkortostan, ET, LN, RS.
- ⁷³ Officially, Mari Traditional Religion.
- ⁷⁴ Where the authors attended.
- ⁷⁵ Conversations with Salim Garifullin in Verkhniye Tatyshly, Tatyshly district, Bashkortostan with ET, LV, LN and NA.
- ⁷⁶ Novyye Tatyshly, Tatyshly district, Bashkortostan, ET.

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