

The Spring Prayer Feasts in the Udmurt Village of Varklet-Bodya in Tatarstan

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This paper is based on observations made over several years in the Udmurt village of Varklet-Bodya which is situated in the Agryz district of Tatarstan. Udmurts are Finno-Ugric people of the Permean language group (Ural-Altai Family > Uralic languages > Finno-Ugric branch > Permean group). In 2002 they numbered 636,935, most of them living in the Udmurt Republic of the Russian Federation which is located about 1000 km east of Moscow, but with small groups settled in Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, and the Kirov Region (Lallukka 1990). I shall be discussing a group that settled in Tatarstan Republic, which is another part of the Russian Federation (the southern neighbour of the Udmurt Republic), and I shall begin by defining some of the concepts used in the paper.

Prayer, to pray.

From the Udmurt root *vös'* - derive nouns *vös'* – “prayer, sacrifice, religion, faith”, *vös'as'kon* – “prayer, sacrifice”, *vös'as'* – “priest”, and verbs *vös'any* – “to pray, to sacrifice, to hallow”, *vös'as'kyny* – “to pray, to beg”, *vös'atyny* – “to sacrifice”. You can notice that there is no difference between praying and sacrificing in the Udmurt language and its dialects. Baptised Udmurts eliminated the part connected with sacrifice from the semantic field of these words, but in the tradition of unbaptised Udmurts praying and sacrificing are very close actions up to the present.

Large prayer house – *byd'z'ym kual* (large/great cabin/hut).

This is a special building for worship dedicated to the guardian spirit of the kin, whose worship comprises the ideas of *genius generis* and *genius loci*. Both of them were connected in the Udmurt notion *vorshud* (*vordyny* – “to hold, to contain” + *shud* – “happiness, luck”).

Little prayer house – *pichi/pokchi kuala* (little cabin/hut).

A building that was in the yard of each family of the religious group maintaining the large prayer house cult. Its everyday use was as the summer kitchen, but during the folk calendar holidays the family prayers were held in it.

Sacrificial grove – *lud* (field).

Sacrificial place of the other main religious group – *lud vyzhy* “lud branch” – was dedicated to the spirit named *keremet* or *lud kuz’o* (field’s master). Sacrifices in the grove were performed in the night-time.

Priest – *vös’as’* (one who prays/sacrifices).

A local religious authority elected from among certain male members of the group for organising and performing prayers and sacrifices, who has two or three elected assistants. He has to be married and healthy both mentally and physically. Till the beginning of the twentieth century some of the priests were appointed to the post by sages (*tuno*).

THE VILLAGE

According to village inhabitants, the village of Varklet-Bodya is more than three hundred years old. It was settled by the people coming from the village of Malaya Bodya, located in the vicinity of Pichi Porga (currently Malaya Purga), who, escaping from baptising and lack of land, founded a hamlet amongst the Tartars and Bashkirians, at the Varklet river, a branch of the Izh, approximately forty kilometres to the south of their former village (Vladykin 1994: 243). The peculiarity of the village is indeed connected with its location. On the one hand, the closest nearby Udmurt villages – Shadrasak Kibya, Lyali, Varzi-Jachi, Yumyashur – were only a couple of hours’ walk away and, on the other hand, the Bashkirians and the Tartars were still close neighbours. The fact that the worship, maintained in Varklet-Bodya even until today, was not at all an exceptional phenomenon, is evidenced by the worship sites located in the

neighbourhood – the Shudya and Zumya kins' prayer houses and a sacrificial grove (*lud*) are known from the vicinity of Lyali, situated merely ten kilometres away (Shutova 2001: 72). Near Varzi-Jachi (c. 12 km) there was a sacrificial place, *bulda*, and a large prayer house; in the area of Yumyashur (16 km) there were two *luds* and a large prayer house; near Kuzebayevo (c. 20 km) there were a big prayer house, a *lud*, and a sacrificial place *bulda*. There is confirmed data that the Varklet-Bodya people went to *bulda*-worship meetings near Varzi-Jachi even in the years 1921 and 1924 (Shutova 2001: 75-6). However, only the Varklet-Bodya and Kuzebayevo places of worship have survived until today.

THE UDMURT RELIGIOUS GROUPS

In a traditional Southern Udmurt village, there were two or three viable religious communities, at least until the middle of the twentieth century. Initially these groups were also endogamous (Vladykin 1994: 272). Such division was first drawn attention to in the 1930s by A. Pint, who found that the inhabitants belonging in the Poska kin of the Malaya Purga region, Ulyn Juri (Nizhnie Yuri) village, fall into two distinctly separate groups – the branch of the sacrificial grove, *lud*, and that of the prayer house. Later, it was ascertained that the branch of the large prayer house actually comprised seven *bölyaks* (groups of relatives), and that the priest of the prayer house and his assistants were elected from among these people. The grove priest and his assistants were elected from among the *lud* branch, which consisted of four *bölyaks* (Vladykin 1994: 271-2). According to some, there is or was even a third branch in the Southern Udmurt villages – the people of *bulda* (Shutova 2001: 57). I was also told about such divisions in 1980 and 1992 in the village of Kuzebayevo and, in addition, it turned out that the members of the group praying on the *lud* did not have prayer houses at home while the members of the large prayer house group had little prayer houses (*pichi kual*) in their barn yards. The Varklet-Bodya community also split into two branches – the people of the large prayer house and those of the sacrificial grove (*lud*). The grove priest could not be a blood relative of the sacrifice priest of the large prayer house, and vice versa. This is

probably one of the reasons why both cults in Varklet-Bodya faded away. In altered social conditions, mixed marriages between the two groups became more frequent and finally, there were no eligible candidates left in the relatively small village (in the 1970s, approximately 300-350 inhabitants) for the position as sacrifice priests, whereas in Kuzebayevo, a settlement with a couple of thousand inhabitants, both cults have survived.

THE SACRIFICIAL PLACES OF VARKLET-BODYA

The large prayer house, *byd'd'z'ym kualala*, is located in the eastern part of the village, in the middle of a grove surrounded with a fence. Up until the year 1975, prayers were held there during Shrove Tuesday, Easter and St Nicholas Day, which is the 19th of December in the Orthodox calendar (Lebedeva 1995: 258). The sacrificial grove, *lud*, where the last prayer took place more than thirty years ago, is located on the northern bank of the river Varklet. Opposite the *lud*, on the southern bank of the river, is an open plain surrounded by trees, *kun'an ken'er* "calf's enclosure" or *kun'an kotyrtem inty* "the place where the calf has to go around", where the majority of the vernal and summer *gershyd* worships are held. Upstream from this, there is a small wood, *jyrpyd s'oton*, with animal heads and legs sacrificed for the dead elders hung on trees. In the vicinity, people come to commemorate the deceased during vernal *gershyd* prayers. Down the stream along the river, there is another site for commemorating the dead, denoted by a single spruce growing on an open plain. At this site, porridge is cooked in memory of those who have not been buried in the graveyard of the home village. The only worship place in the southern part of the Varklet-Bodya is located near the spruce wood at the road departing southward from the village and is called *akashka busy* (*akashka* field). The girls' prayer, *nylyoslen kuris'konzy* is held during the vernal festivity *akashka* (today, on Easter Sunday but in earlier times on Easter Monday).

THE SPRING PRAYERS

The main holidays of the folk calendar, when prayers are organised in the village, comprise the *akashka*, denoting the coming of spring and the beginning of work in the fields, and the *gershyd*, designating the end of the spring sowing. Interestingly, the name of both festivities comes from the ritual meal connected with springtime agricultural work – *aka yashka* meant plough soup in the Volga Bulgar language and *gershyd* denotes the same in the Udmurt language. Under the name *akayashka* or *akashka*, the Udmurts living in different regions understand the holiday celebrated mainly in March/April and which, in some regions, is even today associated with the festivities regarding the commencement of springtime agricultural work, *guzhdor* and *gyryny poton*. (*Guzhdor* is the holiday dedicated to the first areas of field or meadow that appear in spring when the snow is melting; the word *guzhdor* means an area of that kind, and also grass. *Gyryny poton* means “going out to plough”.) At the present time, *akashka* coincides with the Orthodox Easter even in Varklet-Bodya, but the local celebration has a specific emphasis – on the one hand, this is connected with the acceptance of young people as full and equal community members and, on the other hand, with the exorcism of evil spirits from the village, primarily the exorcism of *shaitan* (the devil). The most important parts of *akashka* in Varklet-Bodya are the prayers by the boys and girls reaching full maturity. The boys’ prayer (*eru karon* or *urai vös’*) is also a test of knowing the tradition in one way; the participants, boys aged between 16 and 18, have to do all the preparation and cook the ritual porridge by themselves (see Figures 1 and 2). After two days the boys have to perform all the cooking for the girls’ prayer.

THE *GERSHYD*

The most relevant prayers in Varklet-Bodya, maintained until today, take place during the holidays celebrated in the first half of June, with a joint name *gershyd*. Although in translation, this means the same as the Bulgar-origin *akayashka*, *gershyd* has evolved into



Figure 1. Gathering the food before the boys' prayer in 1993: participants in the prayer are going from house to house (frame from author's video).



Figure 2. Gathering the food before the boys' prayer in 1993: a housewife is giving them some eggs, cereals and meat (frame from author's video).

festivities generally celebrated after the end of spring agrarian work, which is known in some places also under the names *ju vös'* “crop prayer” or *busy vös'* “field prayer” and is today linked with the Orthodox Pentecost. Perhaps in order to slightly alleviate the fluctuation over time caused by the fact that Pentecost is a movable feast, the *gershyd*-cycle together with ritual visit-paying has been extended to nearly a fortnight in Varklet-Bodya (see Table 1). Since the Udmurts were in the same collective farm as Tartars, the beginning of the festivities was also influenced by the time of celebrating *sabantui* (“marriage of the plough” in Tartar) which evolved into a *kolkhoz* (“collective farm”) holiday, as people wanted to start with *gershyd*-prayers only subsequent to this.

The time of the holidays with regard to weekdays was determined by the requirement not to start prayers on the sacrificial place, *kun'an ken'er*, on Wednesday, which, in the Udmurt folk calendar, is called *vir nunal* “the day of blood” and is not considered to be a favourable time for commencing any undertaking. However, as there was an attempt to have the most important prayer on a day off, it was customary for the ritual visit-paying *vös' n'erge* to take place on the Friday prior to the festivities (earlier, when the only day off was Sunday, probably on Saturday); the crop prayer, *ju vös'*, on Monday and the commemoration of the dead *kuyas'kon* on Tuesday.

Wednesday was left aside and on Thursday, sacrificial priests, together with their families, conducted an introductory prayer, i.e. the one asking for permission (*kun'an ken'ere pyron* “the entering to the calf enclosure” or *kun'an kotyrtem intyly kuris'kysa vös'as'kon* “the prayer asking permission for the place where the calf has to go around”). On Friday, this was followed by the foal's prayer, *chun'y vös'an*, and on Saturday, by the earth spirit prayer, *mu-kylchin*. On Sunday *gershyd* culminated with the prayer dedicated to the God of heaven Inmar – *gybyrtton* “bowing/worshipping” or *chun'yn sermet vös'an* “asking for the bridles with a foal”. On Monday, this was succeeded by *aktash* (“white stone” in most Turkic languages) or *töd'y iz vös'as'kon* (Udm. “the prayer of the white stone”), which was the last prayer on the place *kun'an ken'er* and dedicated to a mythological creature named *Aktash*. The whole *gershyd*-cycle was ended by the commemoration of the dead, *kuyas'kon*, taking place on the following day, when, in addition to ritual porridge-eating, people

again regaled each other with moonshine spirit (during the prayers between the two *kuyas'kons*, the consumption of alcohol was strictly prohibited).

Friday	ritual visiting	<i>vös' n'erge</i>
Saturday	–	
Sunday	–	
Monday	crop or field prayer	<i>ju vös'</i>
Tuesday	commemoration of the dead	<i>kuyas'kon</i>
Wednesday	–	
Thursday	asking permission to enter the enclosure	<i>kun'an ken'ere pyron, kun'an kotyrtem intyly kuris'kysa vös'as'kon</i>
Friday	foal's prayer or prayer with the foal	<i>chun'y vös'an</i>
Saturday	prayer to the earth spirit	<i>mu-kylchin</i>
Sunday	prayer to Inmar	<i>gybyrtton</i> “bowing / worshipping” or <i>chun'yn sermet vös'an</i>
Monday	prayer to Aktash	<i>aktash</i> (in most Turkic languages <i>aq</i> “white”, <i>tash</i> “stone”, <i>aktash</i> is also an evil spirit in Udmurt mythology) or <i>töd'y iz vös'as'kon</i> (Udm. the white stone's prayer).
Tuesday	commemoration of the dead	<i>kuyas'kon</i>

Table 1

PRAYING

Every prayer day is conducted by a different priest together with his assistants (see Figures 3 and 4). All priests and assistants are elected from among healthy and married village men. The priest prays with his head covered, while all other men are bareheaded during prayer (see Figure 5). As a rule, all people stand while praying: men are placed behind the priest; women stand apart at some distance. The final prayers of the *gybyrtton* and all prayers of the *aktash* are prayed kneeling and bowing to the ground (see Figure 6). At the present time the long prayer texts are not improvised any more and therefore a few of the priests say some phrases aloud. Yet most of the participants know more or less the content of prayer and elderly people are capable of reciting pretty long parts of it. In June 2002 I recorded prayer words of the following kind: “Let the children we bear live well and happy, let our cattle-beasts be healthy, let Inmar itself protect us from stormy wind. ... Let czar live in agreement with czar, let war not happen.” The most important thing they pray for is rain, because mild June rain is necessary for a good crop. Every inhabitant of the village, even a child, is convinced that properly performed prayers and sacrifices are preconditions for inducing the desired result.

SACRIFICING

From the names of the prayers and from the information given by the villagers we know that, during the *gershyd* feasts, foals (or horses), cows (or oxen) and sheep were sacrificed in the past. Today the only sacrificial animals are sheep. The sheep dedicated to the God of heaven, Inmar, has to be white or of a light colour; the one sacrificed to the earth spirit is black. Whether the sacrificial animal pleases the gods is tested in the following way. The priest pours some water on the back of the animal through birch branches and, if the animal reacts in some way, it is considered to be a good sign. At the prayer *gybyrtton* or *chun'yn sermet vös'an* “asking for the bridles with a foal” in addition to a sheep a goose is sacrificed. Grigorii Potanin



Figure 3. Some priests of Varklet-Bodya in 2002 (author's photograph).



Figure 4. Praying at the *jybyrton* prayer in 2002 (frame from author's video).



Figure 5. The final prayer of the *gybyrtton* in 2002 (frame from author's video).



Figure 6. Sacrificing into the fire at the *gybyrtton* prayer in 2002 (frame from author's video).

wrote in 1884: “Udmurts told me that every prayer would be finished with the sacrifice of a goose. They say that the goose gives a bridle for a sacrificed horse.” (Potanin 1884: 209). The sacrificed horse (or soul of the horse) needs a bridle to find the way to the God of heaven, Inmar, and it is the soul of the sacrificed goose that guides the soul of the sacrificed horse. At all prayers except the earth spirit’s one, the so-called giving up (Udm. *vyle mychon*) is performed; sacrificial food is laid on tree branches or a tree stump during the prayer. It stays there till the last prayers of the day and is then sacrificed into the fire. Putting into the fire (Udm. *tylas’kon*) is the main mode of sacrifice up to the present (see Figure 6). In addition to the bread and meat from the “giving up” dishes, some amount (3, 5, 7, 9 pieces or spoonfuls) of all kinds of ritual food is sacrificed into the fire. Some blood of the sacrificial sheep or goose is sacrificed there too. The only exception is the earth spirit prayer, when all kinds of sacrificial food are put into a special hole dug for the occasion, the *mu-kylchin gu*.

CHANGING TRADITION

Varklet-Bodya prayers have altered considerably during the course of time. The main factors altering the prayers are the following: abandoning of the large prayer house and the sacred grove, *lud*, and related shifts among the religious authorities of the village community; the rise of the new generation of sacrificial priests with its inevitable differences in understanding and imagination; and matching the knowledge of tradition with various practical needs of real life. A strong tradition has to be capable of adaptation and, vice versa, only a tradition with sufficient adaptability can withstand the passage of time. The traditions of the Varklet-Bodya large prayer house and the sacrificial grove involved weak links; the main one of these was probably the inflexibility of selecting the sacrificial priests. During the course of years, the number of eligible candidates became ever smaller and as the selection criteria either could not have been changed or there was no such an attempt, finally a day dawned when the traditions stopped with the death of the last priests. The tradition of *gershyd*-holidays has persisted and will persist in the future, thanks to flexibility expressed in the following:

- a Electability of sacrificial priests from among all the male, adult, healthy and married members of the village community;
- b The absence of a complicated verbal component which would demand extensive knowledge;
- c The simplicity of ritual proceedings and the learning of the latter by all potential candidates for sacrificial priests at an early age (at the boys' prayer).

*Estonian Folklore Archive of the Estonian Literary
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