

Filming Udmurt Ceremonies in Bashkortostan

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In this short article we intend to comment upon the process of filming an Udmurt village ceremony in north-western Bashkortostan. We shall start by giving some basic information about the abovementioned ceremony and its background and finish with reflexion on filming choices.

We have been doing fieldwork in north-western Bashkortostan Udmurt villages since 2013. We have started this project being aware that the cultural peculiarities of these villages are neither sufficiently documented nor studied from an international perspective, while they certainly deserve it.

Our intention is to document extensively the ceremonies held in the Udmurt villages, both for the local population and for the scholarly international community. We started observing and filming ceremonies in 2013 in the Tatyshly region, where there is a fairly structured system of ceremonies organised in the 19 Udmurt villages of the region. We started from ceremonies that link several villages, and were able in 2014 to film two village ceremonies. This gave us the awareness that village ceremonies may also be quite different from one another. Local traditions are strong and, moreover, levels of maintenance and revitalisation are different. Since then, we have filmed many more ceremonies, but the reflections on filming have just confirmed our choices, such as they are expressed in this article. Throughout the years, we have gathered a whole team composed of Eva Toulouse (06 and 12 2013, 06 2014, 06 and 11 2015, 06 2016, 12 2016, 06 2017, 10 2017, 04 2018 and 06-08 2018), Liivo Niglas (06 and 12 2013, 06 2014, 11 2015, 12 2016 and 10 2017), Ranus Sadikov (a local Udmurt researcher specialising in Udmurt religion 06 2013, 06 and 11 2015, 06 2016, 12.2016, 06 2017, 04 2018 and 06

2018), Laur Vallikivi (an Estonian anthropologist of religion, 06 2014 and 04 2018), Nikolai Anisimov (an Udmurt folklorist from southern Udmurtia, 06 2016, 12 2016, 06 2017 and 10.2017) with the help of Anna Baydullina (a local Udmurt linguist living on the spot). We have thus decided – in order to avoid standardisation induced by our activities – to film all the village rituals. This process however will be long as all the ceremonies, with one or two exceptions are held on the same day. So far we have studied and filmed 15 ceremonies, and there are four edited films, which will be presented in 2019 as a cassette.

We'll start by introducing the context and the ceremonies, and we shall comment on the process of filming them.

The Formation of the of the Eastern Udmurt Group

The Udmurt are a people characterised by its Finno-Ugric language, whose core territory lies 400 km east of the Volga. The northern part of the Udmurt inhabited territory was encompassed in a political structure long called the "Vyatka lands", a kind of buffer state between Moscow and the Khanate of Kazan [1]. This was incorporated into the state of Moscow in 1489 [2]. The other part of the Udmurt core territory remained within the Kazan Khanate until the Russian taking of Kazan in 1552. In both cases, the change of ruling power induced considerable changes for the indigenous population. On the one hand, the tax load was hugely increased, as the Russian officials received no salary: their income depended on taxing the local population. On the other hand, the incorporation into the Russian State of huge

territories inhabited by non-Christians, required integration policies, among which evangelisation was one of the more interfering with the population's life. The Udmurt had their own agrarian religion, with a main God, a multitude of deities and spirits, strong ancestor worship and sacrifices in order to ensure the deities' favour and propitious harvest, but without a strong dogma to face the Christian doctrine. Evangelisation started with the constitution of the Empire, but it was not a consequent policy until the beginning of the 18th century, when Peter the Great started his anti-pagan campaigns. These were not particularly efficient until the 1740s, when systematic measures were taken to baptise the non-Christian peoples of the Volga forcibly. This policy particularly addressed the animistic ethnic religions, which were easier to tackle than Islam.

This is the historical context in which whole villages, not only of Udmurt but also of other peoples – Mordvins, Chuvash, and particularly Mari [3] – quit their homeland and fled east, deep into Muslim territories [4]. They rented and later acquired land, paid taxes, and lived according to their traditions, without external interference. While during the following centuries, some Udmurt villages were converted to Islam and adopted Tatar as their language; this conversion was clearly not imposed by violence [5]. The other villages were protected from Christian missionaries by the Muslim environment [6,7]. Until 2016, in the Tatyshly region, there was no Orthodox Church. True enough, in 2016 the Orthodox Church started a campaign to build a church in the regional centre, and had put out in all the village shops a box for offerings. This is not particularly successful, but the church has eventually been built.

During the Soviet period, antireligious policy was no different in Bashkiria than in other Soviet regions [8], although the small villages were spared most of the excesses. The attitude towards religious practice depended very much on the local leaders, and it was always possible for the villagers to perform their ceremonies under cover. Therefore Udmurt religious practice has been preserved in some villages without any interruption, in others there have been some years without religious activity, but since 1990 the ceremonies have been revitalised almost everywhere.

The Tatyshly Udmurt and Their Religious Practice

The Tatyshly Udmurt forms a cluster of 19 villages on both sides of the River Yuk. These are widely homogeneous Udmurt villages. Only in two of them does

the Udmurt population represent less than 90%, in Vil'gurt (Novye Tatyshly: 82%) and Vyazovka (87%). In all these villages Udmurt is the language of everyday life communication as well at home and at work [9].

The Yuk represents a real border, from the economic point of view as well as from the religious: the enterprises that in the Soviet period were kolkhozes were different on the different sides of the River, on the south the Udmurt villages were associated in the Demen cooperative, which is still operating, although with another status; on the other side, the Udmurt villages work with Tatar villages in the Rassvet cooperative. On one side there are 9 villages, and 10 on the other. But the Yuk also separates two religious groups, which coordinate their activities but hold them apart. We shall call them, as the population does, according to the location of their central ceremony – the Vil'gurt and the Alga groups.

The religious activities are concentrated on the period preceding the solstices: the most intense time is before the summer solstice. The two groups decide together the Friday on which they will hold the village ceremony, usually at the beginning of June. All the village ceremonies are held on the same day. Historically the village ceremony was only the first stage of a whole system. It was followed by a ceremony called *kuin gurt vös'*, the ceremony of the three villages [10]. In both groups it was held one week after the first one. Its fate has evolved differently. South of the Yuk, in the Vil'gurt group, the sacrificial priest, Nazip Sadriev, decided at the end of the 1950s that it would be better to spare forces and resources in order to hold the other ceremonies properly, and gave it up. In the Alga group, on the contrary, this ceremony has grown. It is called *Bagysh vös* and is held in a particular location along the road, which is not connected to any village in particular; in 2013 it was attended by 7 villages, in 2015 already by 8 of them. This is the intermediate level. One week after their last ceremony, both groups gather for their group ceremony, the *mör vös'*, which concerns all the group villages and is held in Vil'gurt (one week before the other, as the intermediate level has disappeared) and in Alga.

The winter cycle is much more limited: the village ceremonies have disappeared in both groups. There are only, as we witnessed in 2013, the three collective ceremonies, the Alga group's *Bagysh vös'* and *mör vös'* as well as the Vil'gurt *mör vös'*.

There is another level of ceremonial life among Eastern Udmurts – called *elen vös*, the “ceremony of/to the country”. It takes place every year at the end of June

and rotates between three villages that are situated on the border area between Bashkortostan, Tatarstan and the krai of Perm: Kirga (Kueda region, krai of Perm), Varyash (Yanaul region, Bashkortostan) and Altaevo (Buraj region, Bashkortostan). This regional ceremony was well known, until the late 1920s, on the basis of literature. Then it disappeared and was even forgotten, except in the three abovementioned villages. In 2008, it was revitalised and is now held on a regular basis, rotating today as it did originally [4]. It is usually followed by a folk music festival and attracts people and sacrificial priests from different villages of the region as well as from bigger towns around (Izhevsk, Ekaterinburg).

All these ceremonies are carried on by sacrificial priests (*vös'as'*) and organised by 'the master of the ceremony', *vös'kuz'o*. The two functions may or may not coincide. Each village has one sacrificial priest or more. They are appointed by the elder priest, who chooses his successors: the priest must be a married man with a virtuous reputation, if possible with priests among his forefathers. In tradition, these priests were elder men, not younger than 40. However, today the choice is often for younger men. The function of the *vös'kuz'o* may have existed formerly, but it has acquired an important role with the revitalisation process, for often they were the ones who initiated the whole process by looking for a priest and assisting him in his task.

What happens in these ceremonies? While there are some significant differences between both groups, the core of the ceremonies is the same. Its goal is to propitiate the deities through prayer and a sacrifice and to ask for prosperity, harmony, a good harvest, reproduction of livestock, fertility and health for the village community; their output is a porridge cooked with the broth from the sacrificial animal, the crops and butter collected from the population, and to which the meat of the sacrificial animal is finally added. In these ceremonies the sacrificial animal is a ewe; there can be either one, or more, of them. Finally, the village population gathers and the people eat the porridge together.

The Balzyuga Village Ceremony- Gurt Vos'

There are different reasons why we chose to start by the film on the village ceremony featuring the village of Balzyuga. It was the first and it has been presented in several locations – the Congress of Russian scholars of religion (Ivanovo 2016, the Congress of Russian anthropologists and ethnographers [11], in Samara and in Paris (INALCO, 2018). It is a village with 291 inhabitants, 99% of them Udmurt (that means that one or two spouses

are Tatar); it is characterised by determined continuity; and it is the living place of one of the most authoritative sacrificial priests in Bashkortostan, Nazip Sadriev, born 1930. Sadriev has an experience of 60 years as a sacrificial priest, and kept organising prayer ceremonies throughout the whole of the Soviet period, teaching younger priests and transmitting this particular tradition to other generations [12]. In 2016, he received for his life work the Estonian Fenno-Ugria foundation World Tree award for grassroots activity in maintaining Finno-Ugric traditions. He decided in 2010 to retire and passed his responsibilities to a younger sacrificial priest he had trained himself, Fridman Kabipjanov, the local music teacher who was 30 at that time. He was married and had fathered a son; he doesn't drink and is respected in the village. So this was an interesting situation, with a younger sacrificial priest, an older authority and behind a long history of continuity.

Moreover Balzyuga is the village where we have been living since the beginning of our fieldwork, which means that we are well known by the population. We are also quite close to Fridman and to his family. So we decided to film his village ceremony. Hereafter we describe the procedures during the ceremony and we comment upon the main actors of it.

Indeed, Fridman is not alone in the ceremony: he is assisted by a team. In some places, as well as in the biggest ceremonies, there may be some elder women assisting, whose task is then exclusively to clean the cauldrons and the innards of the sacrificial ewe¹. But this was not the case in Balzyuga. The core team, formed by Fayzy and Shurik, always accompanies Fridman in all ceremonies he attends. Both are peasants, in their fifties, and have much greater experience than Fridman, who relies on them heavily. During this village ceremony, the team was completed by S'idor, who is a somehow younger peasant, and Mengaray. Mengaray is the only son of Nazip Sadriev, who would have liked him to become his successor; but Mengaray refused categorically. However, he attends every single ceremony helping as much as he can with different tasks – in 2014, he was there with his grandson, illustrating one form of culture transmission.

Actually the Udmurt ceremonies are complex activities in which there is always a need for help. As the main activity is cooking, there must be enough wood to feed the fires for several hours; there is a continual need for water – water for cleaning, for drinking, for the broth, for tea –

¹This is a general rule, with the exception of the ceremonies in the Kaltasy district, where women have a prominent role as assistants.

that the assistants bring from a spring nearby. Moreover, the space has to be cleaned (it has not been used for one year), as well as the cauldrons. The ewe has to be despatched and butchered into distinct parts; when it is cooked, the meat has to be sorted out; the porridge has to be mixed until it is ready; it has to be served to the population and finally all the paraphernalia has to be cleaned. So the assistants are continually doing something and there are often different separate actions running in parallel.

The priest is responsible for the right proceedings and for the prayers. There are several prayers in a ceremony. Most of them are performed in the following way: the sacrificial priest dressed in a special costume stays in front of a birch branch stuck into the soil; he holds, depending on the prayer, different items. He reads the prayer and three or four times interrupts the text to say "Omin" while bending down. The others are on their knees, and when the priest bends down and says "Omin", they bend down so that their head touch the earth. The first prayer is made with a bowl of porridge without meat and is meant to promise the sacrifice. The second is made with a round loaf of homemade bread given by the owner of the ewe. A coin is thrust in the bread, to symbolise, according to the locals, wealth. The third prayer is made with a bowl containing some particular pieces of meat (the heart, the liver, part of the head, a right rib, and part of the right thigh). The other prayers are performed in a different way. The fourth is the prayer on the money offered. The priest is bareheaded and on his knees, while the audience is in the same position as in the other prayers. We have seen a final prayer performed only in Balzyuga: it is performed at the end, only for the assistants. Then the priest stays as in the first prayers, but the assistants also stay and bend forward when Fridman says "Omin".

There is no audience at the beginning: the only people present are the priest and his assistants (and the anthropologists...). The villagers arrive one by one at some moment, usually while the meat is being cooked, so that there are already other people kneeling for the third prayer. This time Nazip Sadriev was one of the first to arrive and he participated as an assistant throughout the ceremony. Among the participants there were people of all ages, even children, but all were well trained in how to dress and to behave in a sacred place.

Filming an Udmurt Ceremony

The first remark concerns the context. When we attended the Balzyuga ceremony in 2015, we had already

been around several times. First of all, as we mentioned, local people were accustomed to see us around. Secondly, as we had filmed several ceremonies in summer and winter 2014, we had become familiar with its overall structure and had acquired a substantial amount of experience of filming ritual activities in the region. To a certain extent this previous filming experience helped us to overcome our main shortcoming: none of the researchers in our team was skilled in Udmurt, while Fridman's team conversed exclusively in Udmurt. Ranus Sadikov, the local researcher who had worked with us a year before, was not able to join us this time and we had to get by without a translator. Liivo had to rely in his decision making on his previous experiences of filming without knowing the language (Mozambique, Latvia), on the understanding acquired from filming the other Udmurt ceremonies and on the trustful relationship he has formed with Fridman.

Although it was for us the first time to film *gurt vös*, we had filmed Fridman and his assistants participating in ritual practices a couple of times a year earlier. We had filmed them at the group ceremony in Vil'gurt and at the regional ceremony in Kirga: in both cases Fridman left the praying to elder and more experienced *vös'as'*, but he and his team were actively involved in preparing the sacrificial porridge. Therefore, Fridman and his assistants were accustomed to our research and film work, so that we had the feeling that our presence did not overly disrupt their ordinary routine.

We worked the same way as during the previous ceremonies that we attended. Eva and Laur observed and photographed the ceremony and, whenever it did not interfere with the filming, asked Fridman and his helpers, including Nazip Sadriev, questions. Liivo filmed the whole ceremony alone: he was cameraman and sound recorder (as well as the editor in the later stage). The familiarity with filming the ritual was both comforting and disturbing. Knowing the order of the ritual proceedings allowed him to focus on the most important aspects and moments of the ceremony: having expectations made it easy to be ready for what was supposed to come. But there was also the reverse effect: in some cases the cameraman felt that having expectations was dulling his attention – he had the impression that focusing too much on the expected, he was less ready to notice and capture the unexpected.

This brings us to the question of the main objective of filming these kinds of ritual. Is the aim only to produce as detailed and complete an ethnographic account of activities as possible or is it also important to convey the

'feeling' of the ceremony? Or is it possible to achieve both objectives at the same time – describing every single meaningful act in the ritual process and also understanding the sensory dimension of the event? Certainly, our aim was to capture on video both of these levels of ethnographic information, although we knew from the start that it is a difficult, if not impossible, task.

The multiplicity of activities, many of which happen simultaneously, obliges the cameraman to make constant choices. What, how long and in what way to film one or other ritual act? Should one risk missing important action in one area of the ceremonial ground in order to get close and profound description of another at the other end of the ground? These are the questions that the filmmaker faces while recording a ceremony as complex as *gurt vös* or any other public religious ceremony of the Udmurt. The alternatives seem to be either to try to cover the action of the priest, his assistants and the audience in its totality, which would result in an objective, etic and somewhat cold account of the ritual from a distance, or to risk losing a detail or two and to make choices rooted in the filmmakers own sensitivity and to give an account that is engaged with the participants' embodied experience addressing the sensorial and emotional dimensions of the action.

This second approach gives the filmmaker more freedom to attempt to transmit ethnographic knowledge through images than a positivistic or 'objective' approach to filmmaking. If the latter tries to achieve knowledge through neutral description, the former emphasises the role of the subjectivity of the filmmaker and the spectator. The sensorial and emotional dimension of an image might not be directly visual. Skilfully produced images have the power to make a viewer reflect on his or her own embodied experience, and this, with the help of imagination and intuition, can help to engender cross-cultural understanding. We do not necessarily see the sensory reactions and emotions on the screen, we reflect on them and construct them in our imagination. The sensorial aspect of filmmaking not only helps the viewer catch the atmosphere of the ceremony but also provides us with the opportunity to understand the meaning and the importance of the ceremony for the person attending it.

Although our objective was to record the ceremony as accurately as possible, we realised that it would be impossible to cover everything with the same profundity. In order to avoid producing a detached 'overview' of the ritual that tries simply to 'list' all the major phases of the action, we decided to focus on two aspects of the

ceremony. First of all, our main interest was to look at the ceremony from the priest's and his helper's perspectives, the audience's part in the ritual was covered only to certain extent – i.e. in cases when there was a clear interaction between the priest and the people who had gathered to pray and eat; or when it seemed necessary to show the overall atmosphere of the event. The emphasis on the priest and his men also means that we tried to avoid treating them as anonymous ritual specialists. On the contrary, our aim in filmmaking and in research has always been to show these men as unique individuals, each of them with peculiar character and specific take on life. That is why we have included in the film jokes, stories and conversations that are not directly connected to the ceremony – hopefully this helps to remind the viewer that these ritual specialists are first of all ordinary village people and that the ceremony itself is not a solemn and dogmatic religious ritual but an ever-changing and lively community event.

Our second focus was on the sensory experience of the participants. *Gurt vös* is loaded with sensorial information. As the ceremony revolves around the cooking and serving of the porridge, the images of food and its preparation play as important a part in a film that tries to offer ethnographic understanding of the ritual as in any cooking show on TV. Seeing pieces of mutton boiling in butter in a big cauldron should not only provide the viewer with ethnographic data on how the Udmurt prepare their sacrificial meal, but also evoke the smell, the taste and the touch of this highly nutritious food, thus giving us an opportunity to understand what the priest and his assistants experience during the cooking. One of the omnipresent sensorial features of porridge making besides physical stress and heat is the smoke. In order to fully understand what it means to cook porridge in huge cauldrons on an open fire, one has to see it from a close distance: strong men coughing and crying because of the smoke while stirring the sticky mass with long wooden poles. This information might not be that important from the point of view of ritual symbolism, but it certainly helps us to understand what the priest and his helpers go through each time they prepare food for the gods, and for their fellow villagers. And, at least for the filmmaker who has spent many hours next to these men in the smoke and the heat (and the freezing cold in winter!), it seems that this mundane level of ritual performance is for them at least as integral a part of the ceremony as praying.

Thus, this film about the Balzyuga *gurt vös* is the first of a series about the Bashkortostan Udmurt ceremonies. We go on filming these ceremonies and leaving the material to the people concerned on the spot, and will edit

– more or less in detail- every one of them in order on the one hand to have proper documentation that allows the development of scientific knowledge, and also, on the other hand, to facilitate transmission in the villages.

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