

“THE YEAR REPLACES THE YEAR.”<sup>1</sup>  
UDMURT SPRING CEREMONIES AMONG THE  
NON-CHRISTIAN UDMURT: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC  
ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY RITUAL LIFE\*  
(ON MATERIALS FROM  
VARKLED-BÖD’YA VILLAGE)

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#### ABSTRACT

The authors had the opportunity, during their fieldwork, to attend spring rituals in Varkled-Böd’ya village. The week before the Great Day (*Bydjynnal*, coinciding with Orthodox Easter) is a dense ritual week: there are young people to be initiated, boys first and girls at the concluding ritual, who thus become adults; there are evil spirits to be chased away from the space of the living; there are kin relations to be reinforced through reciprocal visits, prayers and ritual deeds. These four rituals are the focus of this article, which provides an ethnographic account as well as a general analysis of the critical dimensions observed.

KEYWORDS: Udmurt • non-Christian Udmurt • rituals • initiation • ritual songs  
• spring rituals • traditional calendar • ritual practice • prayers • ritual food

In religious studies it is particularly important to analyse traditional ritual practices outside the main world religions and to follow the evolutions they reveal. In Russia,

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the religious situation is quite complicated and differentiated. In a relatively recently appropriated territory, occupied formerly by people practicing different kinds of traditional religion, Christianity, in its Orthodox form, is today dominant: seen as state religion, it has been actively spread since the 16th century and has indeed gained very strong positions almost everywhere, except in the Muslim environment. It is often mixed with reminders of alien worldviews that are simultaneously actualised, while this harmonious coexistence is not felt by populations as contradictory or critical. Religious syncretism in Russia is thus widely spread. Our research field is a Finno-Ugric community in Central Russia, the Udmurt, and syncretism is undoubtedly dominant in most Udmurt areas where the population has been Christianised. Nevertheless, there are some regions in which Christian influence has been very much contained: where Islam dominated, it has 'protected' other communities from the interference of Orthodox missionaries. This is why, when confronted in the 18th century with forceful evangelisation, the Udmurt as well as other Finno-Ugrians fled towards Muslim areas; this explains why there are today Udmurt communities in Tatarstan and Bashkortostan and why they have often been able to maintain their original spiritual culture much better than the communities that have remained in their core territory. In this article, we shall focus on one isolated village in Tatarstan, Varkled-Böd'ya (official Russian name Varkled-Bod'ya),<sup>2</sup> and some dimensions of the religious practice of its inhabitants.

Varkled-Böd'ya is a very well known village in scientific literature (cf. references) that concentrates on Udmurt traditional culture. It does not belong to the territory of the Udmurt Republic, rather it is situated in the Agryz district of Tatarstan, not far from the border between Udmurtia and Tatarstan. Its Udmurt inhabitants are part of the Southern Udmurt ethnographic group. The reason it has received the attention of researchers is that its population, until the post-Soviet period, has never been Christianised<sup>3</sup> and has kept its original ethnic religion,<sup>4</sup> as, on the Udmurt side, has the village of Kuzebayevo in Alnashi district. Thus, these villages have been a paradise for scholars looking for ancient traditions, while the overwhelming majority of the Udmurt were indeed efficiently evangelised by the end of the 18th century. The Udmurt living here have resisted evangelisation and thus this micro-local tradition has formed a sort of religious 'reservation'. We know for example, on the basis of historical data, that Varkled-Böd'ya is supposed to have been a refuge for Udmurt wishing to avoid forceful evangelisation. This is confirmed by Vladimir Vladikin (1994: 189), who observes that pre-Christian beliefs are preserved here. However, close proximity to both Christian and Muslim populations of course left traces on the religious and mythological worldview, and on the ritual system and practice, as we shall hereafter show.

According to the young sacrificial priest Oleg Mikhaylov (born 1972), the place for the foundation of a new settlement was determined according to the old custom: a fir was cut down on a possible location, and if the top broke, the place was seen as unsuitable. According to the legend, they had to try thrice to find the present location (cf. Figure 1), which was recognised as adequate. In 1980, the Udmurt researcher Mikhail Atamanov (1997: 130) wrote down the following legend connected with the foundation of the village:

The first to come here was Bagysh, son of Yurtai, from Malaya Purga. As they did not want to accept the new religion, they fled into the forest. They walked long in the forest, for days and nights. Once, one of them climbed a high fir tree and looked

around: there was only forest, no villages, and not far away there was a small clearing close to which ran a nice river. They went there, examined the place and started building a dwelling.



Figure 1. Map of the Southern Udmurt region.

According to Serafima Lebedeva and Svetlana Danilova (2016: 56), the village was founded by people from Malaya Bod'ya and Malaya Purga of the Malaya Purga district of Udmurtia in around 1775. The village was named after the River Varkled and the name of the clan Böd'ya (in Udmurt Varkled-Böd'ya).

The village is called a Mecca for scholars of Udmurt culture by some researchers (Sadikov 2017: 101) because they have used it for fieldwork on Udmurt religion. Thus, Varkled-Böd'ya's rituals have been thoroughly studied by ethnographers and folklorists (for example, Vladykin 1994; Vladykina 1997; Lintrop 2003); in addition to which we must mention the films made by Udmurt filmmaker Lev Vakhitov (*Centuries and Ages, The Great Day*), who was born and grew up in the village and whose family still lives there, as well as the Udmurt scholars and their research. In the early 1970s the Estonian National Museum organised a series of common projects with the Udmurt Local History Museum leading to two films about the Southern and Northern Udmurt (*Udmurdid*). While cameraman Aado Lintrop was filming in the Southern part of the republic, he discovered that an animistic ceremony was about to take place in Varkled-Böd'ya and so he attended and filmed. Later, this material was edited and a third film *The Southern Udmurt Religious Practice at the Beginning of the 20th century* was produced (see *Udmurdid*).<sup>5</sup> Lintrop was so fascinated by what he discovered in this village that he returned to study its religious life in subsequent years. One third of his doctoral dissertation was devoted to the village (Lintrop 2003). Thus he attended and filmed the rituals we are going to present in this article at the beginning of the 1990s.

The authors of this ethnography followed his steps. As a matter of fact, between the previous expeditions and today there has been a real technological revolution. While the film material has been digitised and published in Estonia, the inhabitants of Varkled-Böd'ya have been equipping themselves with photo cameras, video cameras and computers. They have started developing their own archives on their village and their customs. They are curious about the work of the scholars who have visited their village. When we spent some days in Varkled-Böd'ya in summer 2016, we discovered that the Lintrop's material had not made it to the village and we immediately decided to bring these publications, both the dissertation with the photos and the DVD (the film *Southern and Northern* had meanwhile been publicised in the Internet). We were thus invited to spend the week before Easter in the village and to attend the different rituals scheduled in these days, which allowed us to observe and document these traditions.

We decided to write this account not to offer something entirely new but rather to actualise the existing information with fresh data from 2017. Our scientific goals, of course, went beyond mere attendance at these rituals. We enquired about different topics, for example the sacrificial priests in the village, healing magic practices and questions of witchcraft, commemoration of the dead, recording of folk music – both connected and unconnected to ritual. But these materials are not the topic of this ethnography. We shall concentrate on two pairs of rituals connected with the New Year and associated today with the Orthodox Sunday. The first, on Thursday before The Great Day (in Udmurt *Byd'jynnal/Vös'nyerge*), which coincides with Orthodox Easter,<sup>6</sup> is the initiation of young men. After this ceremony they are considered grown men and are able to fulfil adult male daily and sacral duties (for example to marry). On the same evening, some rituals are accomplished in the different households in order to purify the human space: according to Udmurt beliefs, the awakening of nature brings into this

world different demons and spirits, among whom the souls of the dead, which must be chased from the world of the living. Two days later, on Sunday, there are now two competing rituals. The first is the initiation of young girls, who are considered afterwards adult women. We were told that this ritual used to be on Monday, but for reasons of convenience (the discontent of the teachers that the girls missed lessons because of the ritual) had been displaced to Sunday. The second ritual is simultaneous. Every family in the village performs the *Vös'nyerge*, a kinship strengthening ritual that consists on mutual visits within a kinship group (*bölyak*). Let us examine these rituals separately.

#### ERU/EUR KARON, THE INITIATION OF THE BOYS

This ritual takes place on the Thursday before Easter (*Bydjynnal*). It is usually called *Eru/ Eur karon*. According to Yelena Trofimova (1992: 46), the ritual recorded at the end of the 20th century in Varkled-Böd'ya was called *Uray vös'* or *Eru karon*. One can find rituals with a similar name and content in the tradition of other Udmurt groups, as we find in scholarly literature (for example Vladykin 1994: 137–138; Minniyakhmetova 2003: 89, 95, 99–103, 144–145; Vinogradov 2010: 35–36; Vladykina and Glukhova 2011: 145; *Kto my...* 2012). Different scholars have dedicated some research to the etymology of this name, and Lintrop (2003: 199) devotes several lines in his dissertation to this issue. According to his research, it is composed of the element *er*, meaning 'column, support' and a derivate of the verb meaning to make *karyny* – this explanation may refer to the construction in straw the boys erect during the ritual. Lintrop mentions other possible etymologies for the first part of the name, all of Turkic origin, either *ergü*, meaning 'camp, dwelling', or *är, erät*, 'to adopt men's habits'. Following Lintrop, we suppose that this term originates in the Turkic languages. For example in Bashkir, *Erley* means ritual swearing, which is used as one of the means of chasing away evil spirits and diseases (Khisamitdinova 2010: 369). This hypothesis may be confirmed by the boys' custom of speaking loudly when they burn the straw shed and chase the evil spirits from the village. On the other hand, we have been informed by one of the elder sacrificial priests in the village, Ryurik, that the right name is not *Eru karon*, but *Eur karon*. Other scholars mention other names, such as *Ouer karon* (Vinogradov 2010: 34). Actually this ritual is also mentioned by Tat'yana Minniyakhmetova (2003: 9–98) in her monograph about the eastern Udmurt; but in that region the ritual so called – among other names (as *zin-periosyz ullyan*) – does not encompass the main purpose of the Varkled-Böd'ya ceremony, the aim of which is to initiate the teenager boys. There, its function is to chase away the evil spirits, a function that in Varkled-Böd'ya is dissociated from what they call *Eru karon*. Let us add that the local informants explain the ritual by insisting on those to whom it is dedicated: "the ritual of the boy's coming of age" (*pioslen byde vuonzy*) or "the asking of the boys" (*pi kuras'kon/pioslen kuras'konzy*). Vladykin (1994: 231–234), in his enumeration of the calendar rituals, mentions the Thursday before Easter and the different rituals in different Udmurt villages, but he mentions neither Varkled-Böd'ya nor *Eur karon*.

The ritual concerns the boys attending the ninth or tenth year of school. According to the informants, it is possible to attend this ritual twice. This is usually because of the small number of candidates: a small group of boys is reinforced by some boys who

have passed through the initiation the previous year. These older boys are able to assist efficiently those who do it for the first time, to help them or to give advice. We were told that all the men in the village passed through the initiation. However, sacrificial priest Ryurik acknowledged that he did not because he was not in the village at the time. It is so important for the population that even villagers who have moved elsewhere bring their sons to be initiated. In an interview with two of the boys (Rodion and Nikolay) they told us that they do not imagine their future in connection with the village, but nevertheless they would bring their sons to attend *Eru/Eur karon*.

The peculiarity of this ritual is its gendered quality: it is not open to females. More precisely, it is composed of several parts, and only the last one, which is the most important, is not accessible to women. Nevertheless we were told that in previous years one of the mothers of the participants attended and even helped in the preparation of the ritual porridge. We understood from what the informants said that this behaviour was not approved by the men, who criticised it. We shall comment later on this peculiar aspect.

According to the observations by Lebedeva and Danilova (2016: 62) from 1980 to 1993, before the rituals of their coming of age the young boys must wash themselves in the sauna: "with them, an elder man must be present in the sauna who visually examines them and notices whether they are ready or not for the ritual, do they have the proper age?"

In the first phase, the boys gather at one end of the village very early in the morning, at 05:00. They all gathered at the right end of the lower street of the village. They wear a white pinafore and carry buckets, where they gather the ingredients for the main sacrificial meal (porridge in meat broth). They have the whole morning to visit all the households of the village. Everybody knows what is expected from them, as almost every man in the village has gone through the ritual himself: they give crops, butter, meat, eggs which the boys gather in different buckets. If one bucket gets full, they may leave its contents at some place, usually at the home of one of the participants or his kin.

The dialogue between the boys and people in the households is not long. They greet each other and ask which of the food given is for the prayer and which for the ordinary porridge. Before leaving they invite the people to the ritual meal: "Come and eat the porridge!" It is interesting that this invitation can also be received by women, even though both participants in the conversation are aware that females are not allowed at the ceremony.

In this first part, everybody is allowed to follow the group and there is no taboo for females. All the gathering went exactly as Lintrop (2003: 201) described it in his dissertation, the only difference being that before going back to the place of the ritual, the boys had refreshment. In some houses, usually in households where there is one youngster or his kin undergoing the ritual, the whole group is invited for refreshment and offered food. This time, lunch was offered them in the household of Rodion Matveyev, whose mother had prepared a delicious *balish* (a Tatar dish, a tart of mutton and potatoes).

After lunch the boys go to the place where the ritual is to be performed. They leave the buckets with the food and cover them with their pinafores, then go back to their homes for lunch. Some of the boys, who had not washed previously, went to the sauna and cleaned themselves before the ceremony.

The ritual place is situated not far from the former *Lud* sacred place (for a plan of the sacred place, see Vladykin 1994: 286). Today nobody performs the ceremonies con-





Photo 1. Eru karon in April 2017. The boys gathering food in the village. Photo by Eva Toulouze.

nected to this place, which were discontinued long ago. But the place has not lost its sacral strength and inviolability. This place, according to us, has not been chosen randomly. On the one hand, *Lud* is considered a dangerous and sacred place where masculine rituals are held. However, according to Vladykin (1994), the taboo on the participation of women is an innovation, a contamination of old Udmurt religious elements and acquired Muslim features (for more details see *ibid.*: 202–203). Nadezhda Shutova (2001: 236) confirms this:

Possibly under the influence of the Muslim religion, a *Lud/Keremet* dislike of women appeared, and they were no longer allowed to get closer to his sanctuary than some fathoms, and neither to participate in the ceremonies in the sacred grove. These rules are followed today in the villages of Kuzebayevo and Varkled-Bod'ye.

On the other hand, the ritual is held at the periphery of the sacred place and does not touch the territory of *Lud* proper, which might illustrate the liminal status of the boys themselves. As the boys, during the ritual, show the village community (and probably also the local spirits) that they are independent and able, this may explain the position of the locus not far from the men's ritual space. Actually *Lud*, in other local Udmurt groups is called *Keremet*. Vladykin (1994: 202) observes that this term entered Udmurt culture from the Bulgar, and is widely spread in the Volga region. This is the origin

of the double name and in some places it has even been replaced by the foreign term. According to our informants, it is a masculine ritual, although, according to the eastern Udmurt, some elder women connected to the sacrificial priests – their wives – would in some cases attend the preparation (Toulouze and Niglas 2016). They may attend because of their age and lost fertility. In Varkled-Böd'ya, the woman's status is not taken into account, all are excluded. So Eva was not allowed to attend – this had been emphasised several times beforehand – and she had her own programme in the village, visiting the family of one of the sacrificial priests and discussing ritual matters with them. Nikolai could attend the ritual, and so he did until it was finished.

From the beginning, there was a grown man with the boys, who was relatively passive. He cleaned branches from the place but neither interacted very much with the boys nor interfered with the organisation of the ritual. Meanwhile the boys had several activities to carry on simultaneously. They had, on their own, to bring the cauldrons, clean them, make a fire, and cook the porridge. Actually the porridge is prepared in two separate cauldrons: one for the prayer porridge, the other for the majority of the participants. Into the sacred porridge no pork or chicken is added, and no pork fat, as Lintrop (2003: 201) confirmed in 1993. Briefly, they had to do all that was needed to cook the porridge. But they also saw to their own needs: they put fire to a fat log and melted butter in a pan to cook minced meat, to which they added eggs; water was heated on a separate fire. The whole process of cooking porridge is a very long one, including the sorting of the meat and the mixing of the porridge. At the same time, the boys were supposed to cover a cone structure made from three joint poles with straw. At some moment a horse-drawn cart arrived with one boy and an adult man, bringing them one barrel of water, then a tractor, while one of the boys drove back with the cart to bring more straw from the village. When the poles were more or less covered, one of the boys had the idea to make a door, also with branches and straw, and thus closed the entrance of the hut.

Lintrop (*ibid.*) mentions that they stored in this rough hut the food they had gathered during the day. This was not the case in the ritual we witnessed. What was stored within was the spirits the boys brought with them.

While the porridge was being prepared, the village men, often accompanied by male children, started to arrive at the sacred place. As Eva mentioned, there was a slight doubt about who would perform the prayer. At least one of the priests, Ryurik, said to Eva he was wondering whether he should take his ritual belt, the attribute that would distinguish him as being allowed to perform the prayer, for nobody had asked him to pray and nobody had told him he was expected to pray, as practice requires. He wondered whether one of the fathers of the boys would do it himself, as it is possible to envisage this. Finally he decided he would take his belt and indeed he prayed at the sacred place, along with another sacrificial priest called Nikanor Alekseyev, who had previously been asked by the boys.

The visitors had brought with them bowls for the porridge, which they put down all together under a big fir nearby. The bowls were marked either by colours or by nail varnish, so that their owners would not mix theirs up with somebody else's. Traditionally, people used wooden spoons and bowls on which were marked the moiety sign (*vyzhy pus*). In the ritual we witnessed, there were no wooden bowls (cf. photo in Vladyskin 1994: 218). Still, when our working group (Eva, Nikolai and Ranus Sadikov) attended the summer ceremony *Yu vös'/Yu vös'an* (for the winter crops) in June 2016, we noticed





*Photo 2. Eru karon in April 2017. The straw hut. Photo by Nikolai Anisimov.*

that some participants used the traditional wooden bowl. But in spring 2017 they used plastic and iron dishes.

The children had bangers and smaller pyrotechnic items and they set them off throughout. When the porridge was ready, the boys undergoing the ceremony cut branches from a fir tree and disposed them in a line, under their plates full of porridge. They also arranged themselves in a line behind the bowls along with the two sacrificial priests. Thereafter they put their bowls with the porridge on the branches. The boys stood behind the bowls in one line along with the sacrificial priests and prayed towards the south. Unlike in Bashkortostan, where the priests utter the prayer loudly for everybody to follow, here the priests pray silently. They may move their mouth and make slight movements bowing up and down, but they do not utter a word. This seems to be similar to the traditions of other Southern Udmurt groups, like for example in Kuzebayevo, according to our informants. Nevertheless, according to Lebedeva and Danilova (2016: 61), in Varkled-Böd'ya "in former times, according to the reports of the elder, they prayed loudly and the texts of the prayers were very well heard. The words were beautiful." Everybody bows when they bow, and a final bow shows that the prayer is finished. After the prayer, the boys and the priests taste the porridge. Then the boys go back to the cauldrons and share the porridge: some of the boys bring the bowls to the cauldron; others fill them and bring them back under the tree; only afterwards does each participant recover his own bowl. The men taste the porridge right away, and then bring it back home. According to Semen Vinogradov (2010: 35), when they taste the porridge they say: "O God, give health!"

Before the men go back home, the boys offer them moonshine. They start by offering



Photo 3. Eru karon in April 2017. The prayer. Photo by Nikolai Anisimov.

it to their kin and to the priests, then to the other people in attendance. When the men taste the offered drink, they addressed the youngsters with good wishes. All the containers with spirits were wrapped up in fabrics (scarves, towels) and, according to our informants, spirits were supposed to be poured with the left hand and given with the right. But Nikolai noticed that not all the young boys performed this action. The boys did not drink themselves, while for some of the participants the consumption of spirits had noticeable consequences. Here, alcohol is used, except at the ceremony called *Gershyd* (Lebedeva and Danilova 2016: 58–61) and in this tradition the consumption of spirits may be connected with symbolic or sacred meanings, for *Eru/Eur karon* is a *rite de passage* (Orlov 2004: 94–100). Udmurt scholars have reflected on the status of alcoholic beverages in Udmurt traditional culture, and we find interesting observations in Pavel Orlov's and Shutova's works. Orlov (2004: 99) notices:

In close connection with religious beliefs, the ritual system regulated alcohol consumption. If in a ritual context the drinking of moonshine, often beyond measure, was allowed and even was considered compulsory, on ordinary days, on the contrary, being drunk was condemned by public opinion.

According to Shutova (2001: 188), "bowls with beer or spirits in calendar rituals could be connected with fertility". As we shall later see, this is probably the origin of the consumption of this beverage and of offering it in the boys' and girls' initiation ritual, which have a certain connection with fertility. Nevertheless, it is not an widespread tradition. According to the Eastern Udmurt, who live in close contact with Turkic peoples (Tatar, Bashkir), alcohol consumption is prohibited. In our fieldwork, we have attended

many collective village ceremonies, or ceremonies associating groups of villages, and spirits never played any role in them, although they are also connected with fertility. Spirits are even strongly excluded from the ceremonies. In one case (Vukogurt village ceremony in 2014), Eva witnessed a woman giving moonshine to other participants, but only at the end of the ceremony and outside the sacred area. When she went into it with her bottle, several attendants considered it a breaking of the rules (Toulouze 2016). We suppose that this prohibition of alcohol consumption may be connected with Muslim elements from the dominant surroundings.



*Photo 4. Eru karon in April 2017. The straw hut burning. Photo by Nikolai Anisimov.*

After some time they burned the shed. It is a quick and bright process, which does not last more than a few minutes. All the participants get closer to the shed and watch the flames. Both adults and children set off then their bangers. According to data from the end of the 20th century (1980–1993) “around the fireplace, the young people start to bang loudly with sticks, as if chasing evil spirits” (Lebedeva and Danilova 2016: 62). In 2017, we did not witness such action. As soon as the straw burned down, the structure fell, and everyone returned in single file. When the men went home, the young people started to clean up: they wash the cauldrons, clean the sacred space, and bring back the paraphernalia to the village before going home.



THE RITUAL OF THE CHASING OF THE UNHOLY SPIRITS,  
SHAYTAN ULLYAN

Practically immediately after the end of the initiation ritual another ritual that is performed at a different scale begins. Its aim is to chase the evil spirits from the humanised landscape. Lintrop (2003: 200), who recorded this ritual in 1993, mentions that according to an informant born in 1961, when he was a child the initiated boys were supposed to be noisy in the streets of the village in order to chase bad spirits away. According to our informants, they produced noise with a rattle called a *tachyra* formed of a handle, a wood frame with a strip and teeth. The frame is articulated around an axis and the strip prompts a ringing vibration. Of this aspect of the ritual nothing has remained, except bangers being set off in the sacred area by the male children who attended *Eru karon*. Lintrop (ibid.: 201) observes that that night no special ritual was followed, but that his landlady replaced old juniper branches in the house with new ones. That is quite close to what we experienced, although the ritual aspect, in our experience, was more enhanced.

What is behind this practice is that during the night following *Eru karon*, the spirits and particularly the dead are supposed to move around: this night is called *Kulem poton uy*, the “night when the dead come out”. Actually Vladykin (1994: 231) mentions this characteristic of the night between Wednesday and Thursday before Easter, and most of the rituals he describes have this function, some being quite similar to those we attended. It is a dangerous night for the living, and thus important to protect their space. Minniyakhmetova (2003: 97), asks a question about a similar ritual we find justified: the dead, unlike evil spirits, may be welcome in their kin’s households. Has there been assimilation between the dead and evil spirits (who are supposed to live in nearby locations)? Or are the evil spirits chased away so that the dead can come and visit in peace? In Varkled-Böd’ya, this leads to several ritual activities that are performed at the level of the household.

We attended two of them, in two different families, belonging to two different kinship groups. The first was Oleg’s, a young sacrificial priest’s, family, where we were staying; the second was the experienced sacrificial priest Ryurik Kirillov. In the first, the head of the household brought a white box to the kitchen, which was, he said, “buried deep in the cellar and extracted only once a year”. It contained cartridges. His wife observed that he had not touched the gun for a long time so the cartridge were probably humid and would not function. Nevertheless she helped him fill them with paper: they took bits of paper and reduced them to such size that they could be introduced and pressed into the cartridge with powder. Oleg commented that “of course it is not nice to shoot, but what is important is to have smoke, because smoke is fire”. He also commented on his awareness that he was acting against the law, because of the lack of a gun permit. But his deeds were justified by traditional thinking, for the odour of powder and its smoke, as well as the noise, chases evil spirits away.



*Photo 5. Shaytan ullyan in April 2017. Oleg Mikhaylov burns last year's juniper branches. Photo by Eva Toulouze.*



*Photo 6. Shaytan ullyan in April 2017. Oleg Mikhaylov purifies the yard with smoke. Photo by Eva Toulouze.*



At the same time his wife brought forth a rifle and after having closed the box he assembled it. He also put on headgear. Then he went to the stove, opened it and put last year's juniper branches<sup>7</sup> into a metal pan at the mouth of the oven to burn them. His family – his wife Lyuba, his 16-year-old daughter Nastya (who was to be initiated three days later) and his 6-year-old daughter Polina were around him. The branches burnt quite quickly and while they burnt, everybody moved the smoke towards the people and the interior of the kitchen, where we all stood, with gentle waving motions. Oleg then went around the house with the shovel still smoking, using the fumes to purify the rooms. Oleg directed the smoke particularly towards the lowest part of the rooms, under the table and the chairs, and under the sofas. This is similar to what Vladyykin (1994: 232) mentions for the villages of Pocheshur and St. Sal'ya, according to the Southern Udmurt. Oleg took his little girl by the hand and walked with her towards the bathroom, the toilets, and other rooms downstairs, not forgetting the space under the stairs. Then he went back to the kitchen, where his wife put other old branches on the shovel. Everybody dressed to follow him outdoors. On the threshold of the house, Oleg burnt these branches on the shovel and went out to the farmyard. He even walked for a short time out of the door to the courtyard with the burning branches and then put them smoking outside the threshold. Then, in the middle of the courtyard, he shot twice into the air (Vladykin 1994: 232 mentions different Southern Udmurt villages where there was this habit – Gozhnya, Petukhovo, Pocheshur, Kucher'yanovo, Piseyevo). Oleg took back the shovel, went back into the house, put it in the mouth of the oven, closed the oven and declared that it was over.

The same evening, we wished to attend this same ritual in another family, the family of the sacrificial priest Ryurik Kirillov, which they were aware of. They had been waiting for us. While there are three sons in the family, two of them were still working in Izhevsk, the middle son was the only one at home. The household was thus formed of three people, Ryurik, his wife Zoya and their son.



*Photo 7. Shaytan  
ullyan in April  
2017. Juniper  
branches burning  
in Ryurik Kirillov's  
oven. Photo by Eva  
Toulouze.*

At their place, the ritual started with Ryurik taking the old yellowish juniper branch down from the kitchen joist (a new one had been put up recently). He put it on a pan, which was already on the mouth of the oven with other older branches inside. He also opened the oven, and commented that it was in order to allow the evil spirits to go away from the house. New juniper branches had already been set at their place all over the house. He burnt the branches and after a short moment put out the fire with another pan in order to get more smoke, then went around the house clockwise with the smoking pan, as Oleg did. While walking he said in a low voice: "Let the evil spirits go away!" We just noticed that, unlike Oleg, he kept the pan always at the same height, not looking for the lowest places while his wife and son just observed. When he put back the pan in the mouth of the oven, he made wide gestures with his hands and arms and said: "Go away, go away, black vampires", encouraging the evil spirits, the *shaytans*, to abandon the house.

After these actions, he dressed, covered his head and went outdoors in order, as he declared, to "shake the apple-trees". Then, in the courtyard, he set off two bangers in two different directions and went through the barn into the garden, where he set off another, saying "let the *shaytan* be frightened!" in order to frighten the devils. Then he shook three apple trees strongly, saying loudly some words according to what he said his mother had required:

Go on, my apple trees, gift us many apples! Do not fear the devils! Give us, give us many apples! We'll be waiting for this year's harvest! Let us eat much jam: Let the devils be gone, gift us lots of apples!

Vladykin (1994: 232) mentions this kind of action by other Udmurt groups.

Back in the main courtyard, Ryurik started to talk to Nikolai and said that he was a priest although he was not a priest's son.<sup>8</sup> After these words, he addressed the people around him with good wishes:

Let only good things happen in the future! Let the children be healthy. Let us not live only for today, we must think of the future. Let there be good health. I wish you all happiness, health. Let us live very happy in the future. Let the [new] year replace the [old] year.

After that Ryurik set off bangers in different directions. At that moment, Oleg, who had followed us to this household with his rifle, asked the priest to allow him to "frighten the devils" and twice attempted to shoot, while Ryurik set off two other bangers. The third attempted shot succeeded, and other bangers were set off. Oleg and Ryurik attempted to set light to one bigger banger, without much success until finally it cracked twice.

After having followed that series of ritual deeds, we noticed some differences in the priests' behaviour and approach. While Ryurik seems to give more importance to words that directly addressed the evil spirits, his communication, unlike Oleg's, was not only expressed in acts, but also in words.

We can add an interesting detail about the timetable. As we witnessed, the Varkled-Böd'ya Udmurt chased the devils on Thursday night. For Southern Udmurts living in other villages, even in neighbouring districts, the night on which spirits move threateningly is the previous one (cf. for example Vladykin 1994: 231; Minniyakhmetova 2003: 103–112). Thus, on the Wednesday evening, we stayed in a household in Bagrash-Bigra,

an Udmurt village in the neighbouring Pichi Purga district (Malopurginskiy rayon) in Udmurtia. There, the lady of the household went around the courtyard sticking juniper branches all around. As the Udmurtia Udmurt are mainly Christian, the lady crossed herself and bowed thrice before starting a clockwise tour round the courtyard, sticking the juniper branches inside every door and even, in some cases, over it. She crossed herself also when she did this at the dwelling house's door, after having protected the porch. At the end of her tour, she crossed herself twice. She commented on her actions, saying for example that when she was a little girl, her mother stuck branches into all the windows, but now the windows have changed and she cannot do so anymore. She also explained that the goal of all this was to keep the dead out of the premises. When she was a child, there was a dialogue in the family: she crept over the oven, and her mother asked through the oven how she was; when her daughter answered that she was all right, her mother answered that then she was also all right. Still we did not see her taking away the old branches, in the same way that we did not see our hosts in Varkled-Böd'ya add the new ones. So perhaps the differences in calendar are not so significant, although it does seem that the dangerous night happens one night later in Varkled-Böd'ya than in Bagrash-Bigra.

Thursday is a significant day in all the traditions. Minniyakhmetova (2003: 111) explains that "the Thursday previous to the Great day, as a fracture in time, was seen as a day on which magic activities were able to influence the whole of the following year". As Nikolai Anisimov (2017: 100–101) observes, in the Volga region this day is the most favourable for communication with the world beyond, and therefore it is the moment chosen to chase away bad spirits, and to commemorate the dead of the clan, as well as performing magic rituals.

#### AKASHKA, THE GIRL'S INITIATION

*Akashka* is an Udmurt ritual that marks the beginning of Spring and of the agricultural year and coincides with Orthodox Easter Sunday. This year, both the Western and the Eastern Christian Easters happened to be the same day. But this ritual is not a Christian one. In some villages in the Udmurt Republic, where the influence of Orthodoxy is more to be felt, *Akashka* has been revitalised as a kind of festival. This is the case in Uddyadi village (Russian Karamas-Pel'ga, Kiyasovo district). An Udmurt House (Centre of Udmurt culture) has recently set up, offering services to tourists, among others. Thus this ritual has gained perhaps a commercial dimension (not welcomed by many) or at least a profane one. It reminds us of Anna Leena Siikala and Oleg Ulyashev's (2011: 310) comments about the orientations of religious holidays, which Siikala identified at the beginning of the 1990s. She and Ulyashev argue that Udmurt religious holidays were developing into spectacular festivals, which allowed their preservation.

In Varkled-Böd'ya, this ritual has its peculiarities. From our point of view, *Akashka*, in the tradition of this local group, is a combination of two rituals, the agrarian ritual marking the beginning of the new yearly cycle and the girl's initiation. This is clearly shown by the other name of the girls' initiation used in this village – the asking of the girls (*nyl kuras'kon*). According to Trofimova (1992: 44), "in Varkled-Bod'ya, *nyl kuras'kon* is an integral part of a wider ritual cycle, *Akashka*". She explains the coincidence of this

ritual in this calendar period as arising from the “symptomatic circumstance that the awakening of nature symbolises the Spring in the human life, youth” (ibid.). Nowadays, in the awareness of the local inhabitants, it is only connected with the girls’ coming of age. Unlike the boys’ initiation, there are no restrictions in the attendance of this ritual; both males and females are welcome, except for the gathering of the food, which must be completed by the girls, as the food will be made by the boys. However, it is possible for anybody to follow the deeds as passive observers.



*Photo 8. Akashka in April 2017. The girls walking in the village and gathering food. Photo by Nikolai Anisimov.*

The girls’ initiation ritual started in a very similar way to *Eru karon*. At 5:00, the seven girls to be initiated gathered, dressed in their best Udmurt attire – dress, pinafore, vest, headscarf, breast ornament made of coins, sash over the shoulder –, which they had either prepared themselves or had had prepared for them by their mothers specifically for this ceremony, and which, as our informants emphasised, they had never worn before totally or partially. This year, surprisingly enough after the mild temperatures of the previous days, it snowed and the windy weather turned to frost. The girls started downstream from the lower part of the village, and from the opposite side compared to the boys, as Lintrop (2003: 202) mentioned they must. Similarly, they had buckets and gathered from all the households exactly the same food: grain, meat, butter and eggs. According to Trofimova (1992: 45), the girls enter practically every household. In 2017, we did not witness this practice, for the girls stood and waited at the threshold. The hosts went out themselves and gave them the food they had ready. They had short dialogues: usually the girls greeted the host but did not immediately ask which foodstuff was given (for the prayer or the ordinary porridge in order to know which



bucket it had to be put into). Before going, they invited the hosts to “come and eat the porridge!” If during the gathering the bucket was full, they can leave it in one of the houses. According to our informants, the eggs that remain are sold for 5 roubles each; in 2017, the butter and fat that remained were burnt in the fireplace at the sacred place. As Lyubov’ Mikhaylova (born 1978) observed, the remaining food could be buried in the place where the ceremony was held. In the last period, they use the crops and the meat to prepare a porridge that will be eaten on May 1 by the whole village.

In some houses, as in the case of the boys, they were offered dishes prepared specially for them. In one of the houses, the mother of Anastasiya Mikhaylova served them *taban’*, pancakes made from dough fresh from the oven. The girls buttered the pancakes and covered them with *zyret*, a white sauce made from milk and flour that generally accompanies these pancakes in all Udmurt areas.

After this short meal, the girls went directly to the place where traditionally the ritual was to be held, a spot directly opposite the one where the boys performed their ritual. Today it is very close to the village, for a new household has been built in the last 15 years some 50 metres from the place. It is a kind of islet covered with trees, very close to the ends of two streets. The girls went to the place but were puzzled: the boys who had undergone initiation two days before were not yet at the spot and so they did not dare to leave the food buckets in a place where stray dogs or birds could eat it if left without supervision. So they decided to leave the buckets instead at the closest farm and went to have lunch with their families.



Photo 9. Akashka in April 2017. Buckets of food at the end of the gathering. Photo by Nikolai Anisimov.



In the afternoon there were two competing rituals in the village: the pursuit of *Akashka*, and the ritual we shall comment on later, *Vös'nyerge*. Vladykin (1994: 183–187) mentions *Akashka*, or *Akayasha*, a complex ritual taking place at the beginning of the spring field activities with several different aspects, among which is a ritual relating to ice-melting. This seems quite different from what we have witnessed in Varkled-Böd'ya. The girl's initiation is not mentioned at all.

The boys attended the *Akashka* space and cooked, as they did in their own ceremony, porridge for the girls in two cauldrons, while the girls sat around watching them and conversing. According to Lebedeva and Danilova (2016: 61–62), in one cauldron the boys prepared the ritual porridge for the girls without pork or pork fat, and in the other, ordinary porridge for the rest of the inhabitants of the village. Again, the girls sat around, watched them and conversed. The boys came and went to and from the village, so that at all times some of them were with the girls supervising the cooking of the porridge, while at times they were joined by other people from the village, for example the sacrificial priests, other adults. As they did for *Eru karon*, the visitors put their bowls under one of the firs, where they became more and more numerous throughout the afternoon. When the porridge was ready, the girls were also asked by the priest to gather fir tree branches that they put on one line at the border of the snow. On one of them, Ryurik, already dressed in his belt, opened a white towel on which the attendants were expected to put money, called a *lyugez'*, which had been previously washed, an activity that was absent in the initiation of the boys. Is this connected to the more general dimension of *Akashka*, where all the villagers gather?



Photo 10. *Akashka* in April 2017. The boys cooking the sacred porridge. Photo by Nikolai Anisimov.

Immediately after having opened the towel, Ryurik bowed to it, uncovering his head at the same time. Then, while the girls looked for money to offer, he bowed again, took some money from his pocket and put it on the towel through a handkerchief, uncovering his head and remaining silent for a moment before bowing again. The girls then added their money too, handling it with their gloves, as it is not recommended to give money from bare hands (Lintrop 2003: 203 mentions it may take luck away from the giver). Other people arriving at the spot added money, also usually without giving it with their bare hands (with the exception of one man and two elder women). According to Svetlana Karm, the use of textile in close contact with the other worlds is an old Udmurt custom performed in 'meeting' situations with outsiders, the world of the dead or the world of deities (Peterson 2006: 116). Estonian researcher Aleksei Peterson (*ibid.*), while he was in Varkled-Böd'ya in 1980, observed in his diary that an older lady (Anna Zaripovna Mikhaylova, born 1904) greeted him through a towel. Trofimova (1992: 46) observes that the coins are compulsorily given with the eagle upwards. In 2017, this rule was not followed and people even offered paper money, 50 and 100 roubles.

The village people kept coming, and in the meanwhile the girls were photographed with their families and younger siblings.



*Photo 11. Akashka in April 2017. The prayer with all the villagers. Photo by Nikolai Anisimov.*

Before the prayer, a difficulty arose between the two sacrificial priests about the placing of the fir branches at the prayer place, leading to an active discussion between them about the rules of the ritual. Finally they put the branches one metre behind the row where they had been, leaving in the original place only one bunch between the *lyugez'* towel and the back row, onto which Ryurik put one bowl with porridge. Then he called the girls, who stood in a row behind the branches and put their own bowls full of por-

ridge on the branches in front of them. Then, each of them went with a bottle to a small bowl placed near the money, and poured a little of their household moonshine. All the girls had some fabric (a towel or a scarf) around the spirit container so that only the neck of the bottle was seen. They went back to their row and stood there behind their porridge bowls; meanwhile the sacrificial priests, three of them, waited until the last offers added their money to the *lyugez'*. Then they placed themselves in a row before the girls, uncovered their heads and bowed, followed by all the attendants, who were standing behind the girls, men directly behind them, women behind the men. Then they covered their heads again, Ryurik took the towel with the money; another priest, who remained in the middle, took the porridge bowl, and the third took the bowl with the moonshine. As always in silence, the central sacrificial priest moved his mouth as if he were saying sacred words, with a regular up-down movement of his hands holding the porridge, and then bowed, followed by everybody except Ryurik, who turned towards the girls and said something to them. The girls took their own bowls and bowed again. The main priest went on praying, bowed and went on this way thrice. After this prayer, all of the priests put back on the fir branches what they held in their hands – money, porridge, moonshine. Then, they again uncovered their heads and bowed, followed by the audience. Then they tasted the porridge and the moonshine. The one holding the moonshine took it back, tasted it first and offered it to Ryurik, who tasted it with a bow. The central priest tasted it afterwards, without bowing, and the priest holding it offered it to the first girls, who each tasted it and gave it to the next girl, each one entrusting him with her bowl while she drank. This action lasted until the last of the seven girls had tasted the moonshine. Ryurik and the other priests turned toward the audience and addressed them. Ryurik said: "Let the offered money come back to you in hundreds and thousands. Let our ceremony be blessed."<sup>9</sup> The central priest added: "Happiness and health to the whole village!" One of the people standing answered, saying: "Thank you!"

After having tasted moonshine, the girls tasted their porridge, while the rest of the audience waited. The money, in front of the girls and the priests, was folded by the latter into the towel, while the fir branches were gathered. All the girls gave the priests moonshine to drink, after which they offered alcohol to all the adults who were there, starting with their families and kin.

Meanwhile the boys distributed the porridge to all the others in the same way they did for their own initiation, themselves filling everybody's bowls. The eating of the porridge is structured according to family ties: one bowl is meant for the whole family, all the members eat together from one bowl. At the end of the ritual, when most people went home, the girls and the boys cleaned the cauldrons, thus concluding the ritual. According to Trofimova (1992: 47), the ritual, as she observed it at the end of the 20th century, "is concluded by the thanksgiving ritual *tau karon*: the people present uncovered their heads, turned towards the south, bowed and left". In 2017 we did not witness this ritual. Let us add at this point some comments about the Varkled-Böd'ya initiation rituals that have been thoroughly described here.

We have described so far two initiation rituals. There are some common points we would like to comment on further. The first concerns the gendered aspect of these initiation rituals, which are not performed (or at least not as explicitly) in the rest of the Udmurt area. The boys start the ritual wearing what is in general, today, a female attribute, the pinafore, although it was part of the male costume in the past (Pimenov 1993: 139; *Udmurtskiy* 2015: 47). They quit the pinafore at some moment in the ritual but recover it at the end, when they address God. Thus the white pinafores unambiguously distinguish the subjects of the ritual from the other, passive, participants. Following on from this we are convinced that the Udmurt religious rituals were a factor in the conservation of elements of traditional costume.

We think that the pinafore has a particular meaning and functional aim. Our informants connect it with the practical goal of covering the lower part of the body, because ancient breeches were not closed at the front, as we witnessed when we were shown one of these old items. We think that here the symbolic meaning of this item could be hidden. In traditional culture, a person girded by a belt is seen as being protected from any kind of possible peril. He has formed around himself a closed circle, a kind of marker of culture opposed to the natural world. Many actions are connected to girding and they are all oriented towards self-protection in 'dangerous' locations and critical periods. So a Komi going to the forest or to the field protects himself against unexpected dangers with a tightly set belt (Kosareva 2000: 50). According to the representations of the Udmurt during commemorative ceremonies in which they offer food and when a dead person is brought to the cemetery, one must be girded by a pinafore. Irina Kosareva (*ibid.*: 116–117) observes that for the Shoshma Udmurt a pinafore without the upper part is part of the bride's costume, which shows that this element was used in *rites de passage*. And the sacrificial priests who attend the ceremonies are also girded by a wide belt (*kuskertton*), which distinguishes them from the ordinary participants.

The boys' tasks during their initiation – cleaning cauldrons, cooking – are typically characteristic of everyday female tasks, except that they are exclusively undertaken by men in all ritual contexts. Not only do they perform these tasks at their own initiation, thus proving they may be able to undertake, if needed, ritual functions in the community, but they are expected to do so for girls at their initiation, where the girls are not expected to perform an activity they will be called upon to do all their lives. This feature deserves to be reflected upon, as we have not seen, in previous studies, any comments on this gendered aspect of Udmurt rituals. Is it meant to delineate the gender-specific features of ritual space and activity and their opposition to profane activity?

Another interesting feature is connected with the prayer porridge. Both boys and girls collect different ingredients in the village, among which are meat and butter. But there are concrete rules about what kind of meat may be used for the ritual porridge. Some meats are strictly forbidden, for example pork and chicken. Chicken is a meat strictly reserved for funeral and commemorative rituals, as according to our informants they scratch the soil backwards, that is, towards the world of the dead. Therefore this meat is not used for ceremonies aimed at communicating with the highest world. The explanation is a bit more confused with pork. The general explanation is that the pig is an unclean animal that rummages the earth with its snout. The pig is never used, even



in other Udmurt groups, as a sacral animal, although its flesh is used in everyday nourishment. Can we see here an influence of the neighbouring Turkic, Muslim, communities? Still, pork may be given as an offering in these ceremonies as well as chicken, but it will be cooked in the second cauldron and not used for prayer. What is the status of the second cauldron of porridge? Is any porridge cooked during the ritual in the sacred place sacred? Is the porridge cooked with chicken and pork appropriate to support the prayer of the other participants in the ritual? The latter is a question that deserves further study.

Another comment concerns the musical aspect of the ritual. There are no songs today in any part of it, although older people remember particular songs that were performed during this ritual. We have recorded two of them. Actually the old ladies who sang this melody and whom we recorded were not able to sing it from scratch; they discussed the text and melody for a long time in order to reconstruct it in their memories. At some moment they even doubted that the melody they agreed upon was the right one. See Figure 2 for their text.<sup>10</sup>



*Гидкузьёстэс чужыса, ой, но дасялэ,  
Азвесь гынэ зундэсьёс мед шудоз.  
Азвесь гынэ зундэсьёс мед шудоз.  
Вальёсмылы сезьыдэс сётыса улэлэ,  
Вальёсмылэн сюлэмазы мед шудоз  
Вальёсмылэн сюлэмазы мед шудоз  
Милемлы но винадэс сётыса улэлэ,  
Милям гынэ сюламы мед шудоз.  
Милям гынэ сюламы мед шудоз.*

While sweeping your yard, oh, prepare  
Let only silver rings play  
Let only silver rings play  
Give our horses your oats  
Let our horses' hearts rejoice  
Let our horses' hearts rejoice  
Give us your spirits  
Let our hearts rejoice  
Let our hearts rejoice

Figure 2. The Akashka tune.



We must point out that in Udmurt traditional culture, ritual songs are seen as having a magical function and a magical strength, therefore it was prohibited to sing them outside the given event and time in order not to lose their sacral features and unbalance the surrounding world (see Vladykina 1997: 86). At the moment, this rule is not followed, although the elder generation still remembers the peculiarity of this ritual song.

It is worthwhile mentioning that the village inhabitants, as well as the young people themselves widely use photo and video cameras, as well as taking lots of selfies with their mobile phones. We wish also to emphasise the importance of modern technology in the ordinary and the ritual lives of the Udmurt. The locals as well as the boys and the girls to be initiated used smartphones, photo and video cameras throughout the ritual in order to record the different phases of the ceremony. By discussing with the people, we understood that some of them deliberately record rituals and customs from their village, creating personal archives. Others only record important moments of the ritual activities as significant turning points in their lives and the lives of the village community. This example of auto-recording by insiders is an interesting cultural phenomenon and requires deeper investigation.

Our last comment is about the time of the girls' initiation. The different families in the village came to the *Akashka* place interrupting another ritual we shall comment on hereafter, *Vös'nyerge*, which would last the whole evening. So, the whole village attended *Akashka*, got their blessed porridge and went home to pursue *Vös'nyerge*. Everybody in the village is aware of the fact that initially, *Akashka* was not held on Sunday (corresponding to Easter Sunday), but the day after, on Monday, so that there was no interference between the two rituals. But under the influence of the teachers, who were unhappy to have the girls skip school because of a ceremony, it was moved to Sunday. Actually at some point in previous years, even *Eru karon* was also held the same day because it was not possible for the boys to skip school either (Lintrop 2003: 200). According to Lyuba Mikhaylova, on the day of *Vös'nyerge/Bydjynnal* celebration it is forbidden to give or to offer anything. If one gives or offers something, one must ask for money in exchange, otherwise one loses luck. She thinks that this is probably the reason why *Akashka* was originally celebrated on the day next to *Vös'nyerge/Bydjynnal*. Now, they were compelled to give the food to the boys and girls who were to be initiated free of charge, which is not accepted by tradition. These examples show how this day was filled with sacral deeds that were important for the village community.

We may add other nonmaterial elements of the Udmurt cultural heritage that organically accompany the initiation rituals that were present in our conversations with our informants – taboos, beliefs, communication stereotypes, etc. Let us present two of them here. The first was revealed both to us and to the girls being initiated: while they ate *taban'* at Oleg's home, the oldest daughter of the household, Alina, who had specially arrived the previous day from Izhevsk in order to attend the initiation of her younger sister, wanted to explain something to the girls who sat around the kitchen table, and she started drawing something on the table with her knife, which immediately elicited the comment from their mother that, "it is prohibited to draw on the table".

During the boys' initiation our informants shared with Nikolai some beliefs about the sacred place *Lud*, which is situated close to the location of *Eur/Eru karon*. Breaking or cutting down any tree that grows in that place is prohibited, as is taking away a fallen fence, swearing or using any part of the area as a latrine. They even reported some

tragic stories of events that happened to people who had violated these rules – they are not written, but everybody knows them.

They also shared interesting data about the sacral topography and location of the sacred places. All the sacred places connected with the higher world must be situated upstream, while the graveyard and the places of rituals connected with the lower world must be downstream. Therefore at some time they changed the place where they used to hold the commemorative ritual *yыр-пыд сыотон* (lit. ‘the giving of the head and the leg [of the animal]’) and transferred it to a place downstream because it was situated in the ‘wrong’ place, upstream. In relation to such places, between 1980 and 1993 Udmurt researchers also noted that “the grove in which sacrifices for the dead were performed was situated along the Varkled, lower than the sacred place *kunyan kenyer*,<sup>11</sup> but still upstream” (Lebedeva and Danilova 2016: 62). In such a case, interesting questions emerge about the level of sacredness of these places. What about the old, abandoned place? For the informant, it is a question to which he had no answer: for some of them the place is even now sacred and inviolable, for others it has lost its sacredness.

### VÖS'NYERGE

While the previous rituals we commented upon encompassed either the whole village (*Akashka*), a gendered part of it (*Eru karon*) or single households (the chasing of the *shaytan*), *Vös'nyerge* (‘the ceremony of the ritual’) covers another structuring unit in the village, the *bölyak*. The *bölyak* is a subdivision of a kinship group. The clan structure is still part of Udmurt awareness, although it does not actualise itself in everyday life. But the *bölyak* is a kinship unit that remains alive and significant in the people’s life. It is wider than the nuclear family and narrower than the clan. *Bölyak* are the closest kin, the people you actually live with, a group whose members assist each other. It is organised according to patrilineal principles, so when marrying, a woman joins her husband’s *bölyak* and is no longer part of her father’s, meaning that she no longer participates in her parents’ ceremonies.

The principle of *Vös'nyerge* is that the *bölyak* meets at one of the kin families – starting from the family living farthest downstream. In the Udmurt tradition, this kind of ritual tour is called *shur vyllan' vetlynny/yumshany* ‘to go, to celebrate upstream/against the tide’ (Vladykina and Glukhova 2011: 144; Anisimov 2017: 356). They sit at the same table, pray and eat together. Traditionally, this ceremony was closed so that strangers to the *bölyak* were not allowed to attend. Today this rule is not followed very strictly, but something remains: even if strangers to the kin attend this meeting, as was the case with us this time, they must not join the kin gathered around the table at the very beginning. They must wait until the head of the household has prayed and until everybody has tasted the sacred porridge. Only then can they sit once the first group has left the table. We attended the ceremony in two *bölyaks*: the *Kamit bölyak*, and the *Shor bölyak*, the ‘central’ *bölyak*.

We attended first *Vös'nyerge* with Oleg Mikhaylov’s *bölyak*, who is member of the *Kamit bölyak*. This *bölyak* is quite a young one: only Oleg’s father and one elder woman represented the older generation, all the others were about 40 years old or younger. At the first house we attended we were late, so we missed the beginning of the ritual’s and

assisted only with the eating part. But in the second house we attended the whole of the ritual. The kin gathered around the table. The *kuz'o*, the host, covered his head, girded himself with a white towel (as he did not have a belt), took the porridge bowl his wife had put on the table and went out into the courtyard. There he prayed in silence, his back towards the door, towards the south and bowed thrice before coming back into the house, turning clockwise. When he entered, everybody stood up, he went to the table, put the bowl with the porridge in the centre and tasted it, followed by his wife and his two sons, one a teenager and the second still a child. Then everybody sat down and ate the porridge from the one bowl. The table was covered with several dishes: there was *taban'*, a compulsory food for Udmurt rituals; in addition to the ordinary *taban'* there was a special *taban'*, called *kuregpuz taban'* ('egg *taban'*'), which is a kind of thin omelette on which several slices of boiled eggs had been placed. This is ritual food for *Bydjynnal*. There were also non-ritual food and drink such as *pel'mens*, fowl, tomato and cucumber salad, pickled cabbage, *shangi* (bread covered with mashed potato), fruit, spirits and juices. In this family, the ritual aspect of the joint eating was enhanced by the singing of the ritual song of this *bölyak*, called *Vös'nyerge gur* ('the tune of *Vös'nyerge*').

The text and the melody of the *Vös'nyerge gur* is presented in Figure 3.

The musical score for the *Vös'nyerge gur* tune is presented in four staves. The melody is written in a single line with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a common time signature (C). The lyrics are written in Udmurt and Russian below the melody. The tempo is marked as *mod* (moderate).

Udmurt lyrics: Вöс-сн(а) нö пöсь - ёс - мы ка - бы-л(а) ке лу - ы - лöз, у - з(а) лу ме - да вöсь на - л(а)не у - лэм - мы?

Russian lyrics: Уз - з(а) лу ме - да вöсь на - л(а)не у - лэм - мы?

Udmurt lyrics: Вал-че нö у - ло - мы, кеп - чи у - ло - мы, у - м(а)по - ксь - ке, а - гий - вы - н(а)с, да - у - ри - мы.

Russian lyrics: У - м(а)по - ксь - ке, а - гий - вы - н(а)с, да - у - ри - мы.

Вöсьм нö вöсьёсмы кабыл ке луылöз,  
 Уз лй меда вöсь валче улэммы?  
 Уз лй меда вöсь валче улэммы?  
 Валче нö уломы, капчи уломы  
 Ум люкиське, агай-вынтьёс, даурамы  
 Ум люкиське, агай-вынтьёс, даурамы  
 Даурамы кылъёсмес ум нö вералэ  
 Вакыт ке нö вуылöз – люкиськом.  
 Вакыт ке нö вуылöз – люкиськом.  
 Бадьпу нö сяськаос мамык нö гынэ,  
 Асьмелы нö та дйүнне куно гынэ.  
 Асьмелы нö та дйүнне куно гынэ.

If our consecrated prayers will be blessed  
 Can't we live eternally together?  
 Can't we live eternally together?  
 If we live together, life will be light  
 Let us not part, brothers, for our time  
 Let us not part, brothers, for our time  
 For our time we won't say our words  
 The time will come, when we shall part  
 The time will come, when we shall part  
 The poplar blossoms are only dust  
 In this world we are only guests  
 In this world we are only guests

Figure 3. The *Vös'nyerge* tune.

As is usual for the Southern Udmurt, there are two songs in the village sung by the different families: the ritual song of the *Lud vyzhy* and the ritual song of the Great *kuala vyzhy* (Vladykin 1994: 240–241).<sup>13</sup> Let us add some words about the kinship structure in this village. It is divided into two moieties, called *vyzhy*, as is usual for Southern Udmurt society, according to the deities each worship. Each moiety has its cult and a particular ritual song, which differs from the other in tune and text. The abovementioned song is from the *Lud* moiety. In the third house, the scenario was very similar: the head of the household, Viktor, covered his head, put on a traditional belt, took a bowl of porridge and went to pray in the courtyard. He prayed on the left side of the door, towards the south, also bowing thrice, then turned clockwise and re-entered the house. Everybody stood up when he re-entered the room where the kin had gathered around the table. They waited until he and his family had tasted the porridge: he uncovered his head, tasted two spoonfuls of porridge, followed by his wife Natal'ya and his two daughters, the older and the younger. After that he addressed the people sitting around the table, saying: "Let the prayers be blessed." All stood up and answered: "Let it be so". All the people sat down and could then taste the porridge themselves. The *kuz'o's* wife then poured a shot of moonshine for her husband and served all the others around the table and the room clockwise. At the same time, her husband sat on the sofa talking to Eva; we were offered moonshine last, after all the kin had been served. Then, the housewife distributed eggs to all the children and the younger people, i.e. those who were not given moonshine. Meanwhile, her husband photographed and filmed. On this table, apart from the ritual food, there were fowl, salted and smoked fish, soup, cold meats. Here they also sang, lead by the housewife Natasha, who is the director of the House of Culture.

After visiting these households, everybody attended *Akashka*, then the *Kamit bölyak* went back to Oleg's house in order to continue *Vös'nyerge*. Actually not all of the kin always follow the movement. For example at Oleg's there were only two men of the several who had attended before. There, the table was also full of good things – apart from the porridge there was salad, fish, *shangi*, cold meat and *yöl-pyd* – the so-called 'milk leg', a delicious milk by-product (almost everybody has at least one cow). Oleg dressed, covered his head, put on his belt and went to the table to take the porridge bowl his wife Lyuba had just brought to the table. In the courtyard, it was already dark. He did as all the previous heads of households did, but unlike them, he bowed not three, but six times, facing the corner towards the sauna, before coming back to the house. All the kin around the table stood up and waited until the whole family had tasted the porridge: Oleg, his wife Lyuba, who fed their 6-year-old daughter Polina, after which the middle daughter Nastya, who had just been initiated, took her part of the porridge before her elder sister Alina. This showed that this ritual does not take age into account. In this house also they sang the song, mainly performed by Natal'ya Matveyeva. In this house, too, an old lady answered Natal'ya request and sang *Akashka gur*, the song of *Akashka*. When the guests quit the house where we were hosted, we did not follow them to the last two households of their *bölyak* but went to Ryurik's house instead, in order to have the experience of another *bölyak* to be able to compare them. Our conversations with the villagers allowed us to understand that all the *bölyaks* have their own traditions and are not really aware of what others do. We had been informed that Ryurik would pray in the house and we wanted to be able to compare the rituals in two different environments.





Photo 12. Vös'nyerge in April 2017. Viktor Matveyev prays in his yard. Photo by Eva Toulouze.

When we arrived, the *bölyak* had already gathered, but they were all sitting around the living room waiting for us. It is an older *bölyak* in which there are several ladies over 60. We also understood that the younger generation of the *bölyak* had already left because they live in town.

When we entered the room, Ryurik was putting his belt on; he had his head covered and he was in the middle of the room. Nikolai did not take his overcoat off and filmed what was happening in his winter clothes because he supposed that he would be required to go outdoors to film the prayer. Ryurik's wife Zoya asked him why. When Nikolai explained the reason, they started to discuss the habits of other *bölyaks* among themselves, because they prayed indoors. The women said that in the other *bölyaks* the habit of praying outdoors is a mistake, because the only prayer that is performed outdoors is the one with the first morning *taban'*. For the other *bölyaks*, this has become the main form. Later, without mentioning any time, Ryurik added that formerly they performed this prayer in the *kuala*. It is interesting to compare these ceremonies in two different *bölyaks*. According to what the members of the *Kamit's bölyak* told us, after the war in one of their households there was no head, for he had not come back from the war, so his son, still a teenager, was the one entrusted with the prayer. But he was shy and he decided to go out with the *taban'* to pray in the courtyard. There, he had to urinate, and he put the dish with the pancakes on the ground, where they were eaten by the hens. In another version the eater was a dog. So they explain the practice of praying in the courtyard.

Then quite a complex ritual started led by Ryurik, with a deliberate series of standing on a chair,<sup>14</sup> sitting, bowing, covering and uncovering his head, while manipulating



the ritual food. We are able to describe it exactly only thanks to the video recording we were able to make. When Ryurik made a sign, all the kin gathered behind him and he bowed. Then he sat for a moment, while the two other men, among whom was his second son, took their places in the same row, the women standing behind. Then Ryurik stood up and took the porridge from the table. He stood silently for some time, praying, and then bowed, followed by everyone else. He did this a second and a third time. By the third time, a young girl came to stand among the other women. Her head was not covered, but she had a headscarf in her hands and she put it on immediately. All the women had headscarves on, while the men were bare-headed. Then Ryurik put the porridge on the table, uncovered his head and bowed, sat down and immediately stood up and tasted the porridge.

Then he sat down, stood up again, bowed, put his headgear on, and took in his hands the dish with the *kuregpuz taban'*. On the *kuregpuz taban'* there were three boiled and painted eggs. He acted as before, praying and bowing thrice, followed by the others; then he put the dish on the table, uncovered his head, bowed, sat down for a



Photo 13. *Vös'nyerge* in April 2017. Ryurik Kirillov prays at home. Photo by Eva Toulouze.

moment, then stood up and put his headgear on. Then he took a bowl (probably full of *sur*, Udmurt homemade beer<sup>15</sup>) from the table, prayed and bowed thrice, put the bowl back on the table, uncovered his head, bowed, sat down, stood up, and drank from the bowl. Then he turned clockwise towards his wife and gave her the bowl for her to drink also. While she drank, he bowed, and sat down while his wife gave the bowl to their son, who passed the bowl to the other man, who drank and gave it clockwise to one woman behind him, the one who was staying closer to Zoya, Ryurik's wife and finally all the members of the *bölyak* tasted it. At the same time Ryurik stood up and took another bowl with which he prayed and bowed thrice. Actually the first time he bowed nobody followed him, because the man was passing the bowl behind him and did not pay attention. But the other times, everybody imitated Ryurik. Then he put the bowl back on the table, uncovered his head and bowed, sat down, stood up and drank from that bowl also, passing it to his wife. He then bowed again, sat down for a moment, stood up with his headgear in his hand, went out of the room, got rid of his headgear, came back and said, "let the prayers be blessed", then took out his belt and rolled it, putting it back on a shelf properly. He then addressed Nikolai: "Now [the belt] shall rest until [the ceremony] *kunyan kenyer* [the fence for the calves]". At the same time the members of the *bölyak* continued to pass a bowl with the moonshine to one another and to taste the blessed drink. Afterwards the ceremony was finished and everyone moved around the room. We noticed at that point that some women put away the jackets and cardigans they wore during the prayer.

Later Ryurik said: "One must not pray in a shirt, one must have a jacket or something like that". According to the memories of the elder generation, formerly the sacrificial priests had white caftans (*töd'y shortderem*) meant for ritual ceremonies. These no longer exist and have been replaced by black jackets. It is interesting to note that such ritual actions as previously described were part of commemorative ceremonies. When people perform *kuyas'kon* (throwing, offering), they wear overcoats (cardigans, jackets, etc.) and/or put on headgear, which they later take off. These actions are most probably needed in communication with the world beyond (both the higher and the lower).

Everybody sat at the table, the women on one side, the men on the other.<sup>16</sup> Ryurik's wife served him the moonshine first and continued with the other members of the *bölyak* clockwise, while he took out the shell of the boiled eggs and his son brought to the table fresh home-baked bread. In addition to the ritual food, there were salads, pizzas, boiled meat, cold meat, 'milk leg', orange slices and biscuits, and Ryurik opened and sliced the eggs, arranging them nicely on the *kuregpuz taban'* and cutting the latter into pieces. Before drinking the moonshine, everyone tasted the blessed porridge. After she had served her kin, Zoya went to Nikolai and offered him moonshine, saying: "we serve here first the men, therefore I give Nikolai first". Then she offered another shot to Eva. Zoya held the glass with her right hand and poured the spirits with the left.

Some time later, they insisted that we sit down, explaining that the prayer had already taken place, so we were allowed to join them. So we sat with the representatives of the five houses composing the *Shor bölyak*. One of the elder women explained that formerly they could invite guests to *Vös'nyerge*: "We also formerly invited guests from far away. Our uncle Petya always had guests at *Vös'nyerge*."

Actually, behind the table the younger girl took her headscarf off so that she was the only woman bareheaded. Zoya explained that formerly, when they held ceremonies,



Photo 14. *Vös'nyerge* in April 2017. Ryurik Kirillov's kin around the table. Photo by Eva Toulouze.

the married ladies tied their scarves in front, unmarried women behind. According to Nikolai's informants, the Udmurt women from Staraya Sal'ya (district of Kiasovo, Udmurtia), belonging to the Southern Udmurt group, always tied their scarves in front at ceremonies. This phenomenon was thus a marker of the Udmurt's spiritual culture and was compulsory in communicating with the world of the deities. The conversation was pleasant and subdued, in a quiet atmosphere; clearly the members of the *bölyak* were interested in reflecting on what they use to do among themselves, so that what could have been a formal interview became a general conversation, with the participants mutually eliciting reflexions and stories.

## CONCLUSION

This is an account of the four spring rituals the authors experienced in Varkled-Böd'ya. These rituals are on the one hand quite original, for nowhere do we find, at least as clearly as in Varkled-Böd'ya, records of initiation rituals today. These rituals are clearly meaningful for the community and all its members, which is the main reason why we were invited to attend them. On the other hand, they are intertwined with other ritual practices, the likes of which we may find in other regions; it is the connexion between them and the initiation rites that gives them their original character. So, in many places there are rituals aimed at freeing the human space of bad spirits; but nowhere are they so clearly connected with the boys' initiation ritual despite the fact that in many cases they have disappeared from active practice. Similarly, *Akashka* is a well-known name in Southern Udmurt regions and in the Udmurt periphery, and usually covers the ritual

complex marking the beginning of the year, i.e. spring agricultural work, as part of an agrarian cult; but nowhere, as far as we know, is *Akashka* connected with the girls' initiation ritual. Analysis of these rituals reveals that they encompass deep layers of a rich traditional worldview that has clearly been adapted to the modern world (Oleg's family is clearly a modern one, with all the technology that goes with it), while at the same time retaining its peculiar features. These features do not weaken it, but give it resilience to face the challenges of the 21st century.

Apart from this, observation among, and conversation with, the locals reveal the resilience of ancient forms of social structure, such as a clan system with a common protective spirit, *Vorshud*, as well as the patrilineal kin group, *bölyak*. We must remark that in other areas, these structures are being disrupted or forgotten. It is important also to emphasise that the inhabitants of the village pursue their old traditions and in some cases they keep and protect their cult buildings and places, even if they are no longer used in active religious practice: for example many courtyards still have the family sanctuary *kuala*, which has disappeared in most Udmurt regions. The owners are well aware of its value and importance and respect the prescriptions and prohibitions connected with it.

It is also important to observe that other peculiarities reveal the resilience of these rituals. They are occasions for families who no longer live in the village to come back for attendance. In a context in which villages are depleted of their population and most young people do not expect to connect their future with the village, everybody envisaging that they will continue to travel back and forth to Varkled-Böd'ya shows optimism about the future and the wish that their descendants would not lose these traditions. At least it is what the young initiated told us. Even if the village at some moment ceases to exist, it remains the centre of their spiritual life and their connection to the ancestors of their kin.

We want also in conclusion to thank heartily Oleg's family for their hospitality and his help in collecting data. We were received in their family as kin, and the interaction was pleasant and enriching for both sides. Oleg, who is himself a young sacrificial priest, was extremely keen on sharing his experience, but also very curious about our experiences in other Udmurt regions. We are looking forward to continuing interaction with them and working more in depth on the materials we gathered in Varkled-Böd'ya. We wish to express our gratitude to all the inhabitants of Varkled-Böd'ya, who cooperate with us and shared their experience of the local community's culture.

## NOTES

1 In Udmurt *Arez ar voshte*.

2 We use here the Udmurt names for the main places, while indicating at the first mention the official Russian name.

3 Today there are some individuals who have been baptised into the Orthodox Church, but this does not prevent them from attending local rituals with the rest of the population.

4 The Russian scientific tradition calls these beliefs 'pagan' (*yazychniki*). The population itself has adopted this external denomination. The authors do not agree with this linguistic practice and use other, more neutral expressions. Either the word pagan elicits classical reminiscences, which are in no way close to traditional Udmurt religious practice, or it is a Christian way of iden-



tifying the other, the Non-Christians, and we have no reason to start from a Christian reference point. In addition there is an alien and contemptuous connotation to the word with which we do not relate. We shall thus use expressions such as 'Udmurt religion' or 'ethnic religion', which correspond to the Udmurt *udmurt oskon* or *udmurt vös*'.

5 The expression 'at the beginning of the 20th century' was a compulsory one in the Soviet period: it was unthinkable to suggest that in the contemporary Soviet Union such remains of 'primitive' customs could be alive. Thus the strategy of the ethnographers was to present these materials not as reality, but as reconstructions of former, extinct traditions (see Toulouze and Niglas 2010).

6 This coincidence has been mentioned by all of our informants as a general rule, as well in Varkled-Böd'ya and in other regions, like Bashkortostan, although Christianity is not generally spread in these Muslim regions. This is a contemporary practice by the peoples of the Volga. It may not always have been so, but we do not know exactly at what moment it became a rule: probably in the past it could have coincided only with the general period, but at the moment the coincidence is general and openly admitted.

7 The previous year these branches had been placed in all the rooms of the house, as a protection against evil spirits. When we arrived on Wednesday night, they had already been replaced with fresh ones and the old branches had been gathered in a plastic bag.

8 Cf. Vladynkin (1994: 270) comments on the necessity for such people to become priests because of the lack of descendants of former priests.

9 It is not easy to translate both correctly and functionally the Udmurt ritual terminology into languages predetermined by Christian religious practices. The Udmurt expression, which functionally corresponds to a blessing, means 'let it be accepted/let it be heard'.

10 Here and further on, the musical score is by Ekaterina Korotayeva. Translation into English by Eva Toulouze, based on the Russian translation by Nikolai Anisimov.

11 *Kunyan kenyer* (*Kunyan* 'calf', *kenyer* 'fence') – name of a sacred place where a spring-summer ceremony takes place – Gershyd (cf. Lebedeva and Danilova 2016).

12 *Kual/kuala* is a cult building (for more details cf. Vladynkin 1994: 272–273). There are two sorts of *kuala*: family *kuala* (*pokchi kuala*) and clan *kuala* (*bydjym kuala*). The family sanctuary was in each family's courtyard. The *kualas* have disappeared in most of the Udmurt areas, while in Varkled-Böd'ya many are still preserved. Varkled-Böd'ya also has a Great *kuala*, which is also a very rare phenomenon: only one other is known, in the nearby village of Kuzebayevo, in Alnashi district, Udmurtia (Vladynkin 1994: 289). In Varkled-Böd'ya it is no longer used for cult purposes, while in Kuzebayevo it is still used.

13 Here Vladynkin actually comments on what he called *vös' gur*, the melody sung in the ritual *Gershyd*. In our fieldwork, we came across the concept of *gershyd gur*, but not the name *vös' gur*. *Gershyd gur* actually differs from this tune. But we refer to Vladynkin in reference to the observation that the two kin groups have two different songs. For more details about this phenomenon, cf. Boykova and Vladynkina 1992: 12 and Vladynkina 1997: 90.

14 The chair on which Ryurik stood and where he repeatedly sat during the prayer process, has a special status. In the local community it is called the chair of the master/elder/priest (*kuz'o pukton/tör pukon/vösyas'kis'len pukonez*). Nobody is allowed to sit on it, except the head of the household. Formerly, coins were hammered into such chairs. The informants told us that these chairs were homemade, but that none survive today. When the family moves into another house, the chair remains in the previous one. Aleksei Peterson (2006: 116) reported in 1980 on these chairs in Varkled-Böd'ya homes.

15 According to our informants, they previously added hops to the *vös'nyerge sur*, as well as a branch of willow with buds. We must add that people drink this beer from one bowl, holding it with both hands.

16 According to the participants, in commemorative ceremonies they set two distinct tables, one for the men close to the sacred corner, one for the women in the kitchen, close to the stove (in the *kyshnopal*, the side of the women) (for more details see Vladyskin 1994: 248–249).

## SOURCES

Fieldwork material has been collected in Varkled Böd'ya by Eva Toulouze and Nikolai Anisimov in April 2017. Materials (including photos and videos of rituals and interviews) are kept in the authors' personal collections.

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