

DRINKS IN THE CULTURE OF THE PEOPLES OF THE VOLGA-
URALS REGION*

3RD ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD SYMPOSIUM IN LUDORVAY,
UDMURTIA, SEPTEMBER 18–20, 2018

The tradition of ‘field symposia’ in Ludorvay, Udmurtia, is the result of cooperation between the Open Air Museum and the Academy of Sciences humanities research institute. The project was started by Elena Popova, a researcher at the Institute. Popova is officially an ethnographer, who later specialised in visual anthropology. However, her approach in all her endeavours is really a fully anthropologic approach, which she implements in the organisation of these symposia. She is also a passionate fieldworker. This is probably why the conception underlying these symposia is fieldwork, and connection to present realities. Popova also emphasises that one of the goals of these symposia is to give the museum staff information and inspiration to invest in their work.

The first two-day gathering, in 2014, was dedicated to the institution of mutual assistance in the culture of the Peoples of the Volga-Urals region, called in Udmurt *veme*. This approach was widened in 2016, when the topic was sacred space in the same region, which appears to provide the spatial framework of these symposia. In 2018, the topic was drinks in culture, a topic that is wider than one could imagine. While the geographic area was pre-defined, comparative approaches are always welcome, and thus some presentations touched upon other Russian regions – such as Siberia – or other parts of the world. The understanding of ‘drinks’ itself was quite extensive: while

sometimes conferences concentrate on alcoholic drinking (such as the Drinking and Driving Is so Much Fun workshop held in Tartu in 2013), this one took into account the different kinds of drink that are relevant for the cultures in which they were observed.

The programme of the symposium was very rich: there were different kinds of activities and events, all connected with the topic of the symposium. The opening was original in its form. After short speeches by the director of the museum, the director of the research institute and Popova, the Glazov museum of local history presented a short play without words but with songs about Udmurt eating and drinking, illustrating the production of crops and other raw materials. The following event, the opening of a mysterious ‘landscape exhibition’, was a real surprise for all the participants. The museum is situated in huge grounds (ca 40 ha), including a spring, beside which there is now not only the wooden sculpture of an old woman, but also a functioning device for making moonshine. All the participants were offered moonshine directly taken in a wooden spoon, accompanied by welcome songs in the Udmurt tradition. Another opening was included in the programme a bit later, in the room hosting the presentations: a graphic exhibition with paintings directly conceived for this event. Anna Shevtsova, an artist from Moscow, had discovered in 2017 the Udmurt and Udmurt culture and had accepted the challenge of

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preparing a personal exhibition one year later, called Udmurt Tetramorph. We may say that her approach to art is both naïve and reminiscent of medieval illuminations. She drew inspiration from Udmurt mythology to create enchanting miniatures.

Ludorvay's museum has included in its programme different activities, on a daily basis. Among them, they offer their visitors ethnic food and drinks they prepare themselves. The symposium was interspersed by sessions, usually right after the meals, in which the staff showed how to prepare some drinks and offered samples. On the first day there were samples of herbal tea and, in the evening, Udmurt homemade beer, *sur*, as made by Liliya Garayeva, an Eastern Udmurt tradition bearer from Bashkiria. Garayeva had been invited personally to this symposium and she fully participated in the first day: she commented on some presentations and even acted as informer for some of the participants. Of course, she showed us the process of making *sur*, but it requires time and must rest before consumption, so we tasted one she had prepared at home. The next day we discovered non-alcoholic berry drinks, with samples made from wild cherry, guelder rose and blackcurrant, and, in the evening were introduced to the making of Udmurt *kvas*, a drink based on crops with the addition of rye bread. Finally, the participants and the audience were led to the apiary. The museum makes its own honey and its own mead, and the staff member responsible for the bees, Vladimir Maratkanov, gave everybody a taste.

Every evening, the staff of the museum sang, thus giving a living sample of Udmurt singing traditions: singing is at the core of Udmurt behaviour and is still very much alive. We were offered drink so often that we had many opportunities to discover the tradition of singing while offering food or drinks (Rus: *ugoshcheniye*). The last evening, we attended the ritual of *bereket* ('barrel'), where a small barrel of moonshine is

presented with an offering due the first time one drinks. Then, everybody was encouraged to sing according to their own tradition, and thus we had songs from Austria, Hungary, Ireland, from the Eastern Udmurt and from the Udmurt from Udmurtia.

The scientific programme was the core of the symposium. In addition, a presentation of books published by the participants about food and drinking culture had been organised. The main part of the scientific programme were the presentation sessions that occupied two and a half days.

In the construction of the symposium, general issues covered the first session: Tatyana Vladykina, the leading Udmurt folklorist, opened the scientific part with a presentation on the symbolic meaning of food and drink in Udmurt rituals. In the same session, there were two other general but very different issues on the use of plants in the preparation of drinks, by ethnobotanist Nadezhda Suntsova, and the presence of drinks in modern social life and their use in festivals and in branding, by Elena Popova. There were also precise studies of concrete cultures. From Bashkiria, we had two insights: we became thoroughly acquainted with *kumys*, the fermented mare milk drink of the Bashkir, thanks to El'za Migranova from Ufa. She had brought two kinds of *kumys* for the audience to taste at the coffee break. We also reflected on the use of moonshine in Eastern Udmurt culture with a presentation by Anna Baydullina, herself from the Udmurt community in North-Western Bashkortostan.

The following section led us far away from Russia, into Western Europe, with two presentations about Southern Europe. Both Mikhail Kabitskiy and Natal'ya Bronnikova from Moscow have been exploring the culture of wine in the Latin countries – Italy, Spain, Portugal, France, the social habits connected with its use on the bases of extensive fieldwork (Kabitskiy) and the way wine is consumed, with or without water, depending on the historical period (Bronnikova), on

the basis of interviews. Jenny Butler (Cork) introduced the audience to Irish drinking culture, and many unexpectedly recognised common features with Udmurt practices... The audience very much enjoyed Christian Pischlöger's presentation about Vienna's wines, which was both reflexive and practical, for Christian had brought the very same wines he told us about for the audience to taste and discover.

The second day led us to discover different practices connected to tea. Sometimes it is also revealing to pinpoint absences and not only presences: coffee was totally missing on those three days, which shows that its social use has not been felt to be as relevant in the region investigated. The only indirect presence of coffee was in the last presentation of that second morning, that of Maria Sukhova's (Glazov) about a collection of items connected with tea in urban culture, in which there were some coffee-related cups. Here, the regional principle was rigorously respected: we had some insights on the use of tea by Russians and by Tatars, all of them in the region announced. We discovered how tea shaped the fate of a town like Kungur (Ol'ga Renyova, Kungur) and how nuptial arrangements built up around tea ceremonies in the Votkinsk factory (Alla Karpeyeva, Votkinsk). Aleksandr Chernykh (Perm') gave us a very detailed insight into the place of tea in Russian culture in the region crossed by the Kama River. We can regret that Tatar culture was not present enough in this symposium because it is probably the strongest in the Volga-Ural region. That morning, there was only an explanation of how tea is present in the life of the Tatars living in Northern Udmurtia (Diana Kasimova, Glazov).

The following section was probably the most heterogeneous of the symposium: the presentations were more or less isolated and while they had no evident connection with one another, they had none at all with all the other issues. Art Leete (Tartu, Estonia) brought us to the arctic culture of the Rus-

sian North and investigated, not without humour, how the 19th century 'fieldworkers' commented on and interpreted the use of spirits by indigenous peoples. The next presentation was humorous *per se*, because it touched upon caricature related to drinking and drinkers in the Soviet press (Ivan Grin'ko and Anna Shevtsova, Moscow). Mariya Vyatshina (Tartu, Estonia) concentrated on one Udmurt village to show the impact of anti-alcohol campaigns. Finally, Denis Kornilov represented the only moment of visual anthropology by showing us two short films, or just edited video material: one he shot in his own village, about a neighbour who is afflicted with a dependency on alcohol and is trying to get free of it and get back some agency in his own life. Only a very close and trusted person would be able to film such delicate sequences, and Denis is very cautious about the places where he shows it. The other is as delicate and sensitive, and even more mysterious: four elder women wait somewhere and interact while sipping moonshine. No subtitles allow a foreign audience to follow their conversation, but what they say is actually not relevant. The audience must focus on their body language, and on how they relate to the small glass they sip from. Denis Kornilov is a born visual anthropologist. With his mere presence, he elicits trust and allows people to behave as if there were unaware of the camera.

After a necessary break to digest the emotions coming from the films, the symposium went on with presentations about different communities in the Volga-Ural region. Thematically, we were moving nearer and nearer to the Udmurt: from the use of different drinks by the Bashkir (Margarita Sulejmanova, Ufa) and by the Komi-Permyak (Tat'yana Goleva, Perm') up to the Russians in Northern Udmurtia (Ljubov' Likhacheva, Glazov). The last presentations of the day started to concentrate on the Udmurt: the use of drinks associated with incantations (Tat'yana Panina, Izhevsk), the use of *sjukas'*

(*kvas*) in rituals and in everyday life (Galina Glukhova, Izhevsk) and the drink called *vars'* in the Sharkan region (Yuri Perevozchikov, Izhevsk).

The last day was fully dedicated to Udmurtia. Some presentations appeared to be quite organically connected, echoing to one another. It started from an external glance on Udmurt drinking culture (Eva Toulouze, Tartu and Paris), who has been able to carry out fieldwork in the Udmurt areas since 1990. Her presentation was followed by insiders' views on alcohol both in general and in ritual, mainly about funeral and commemorative rituals (Nikolai Anisimov, Tartu) and in ceremonial rituals (Nadezhda Shutova, Izhevsk). Observations pinpointed in the first of the three presentations received interpretation in the two others. Other presentations focused on the communicative function of offering drinks (Tat'yana Russkikh, Izhevsk), on the wedding use of them by Russians in Udmurtia (Svetlana Tolkacheva, Izhevsk). Two presentations focused on the lexical aspect: Tat'yana Dushenkova (Izhevsk) analysed the names of the milk-based drinks, while Valey Kel'makov commented on the name of mead in Udmurt. It is one of the enriching aspects of these symposia: Popova always endeavours to have an interdisciplinary approach and to associate disciplines other than ethnology and folklore, like linguistics, botany, and others.

The last session reminded us that we were in a museum and dealt with representation of drinks. Firstly, it was dedicated to the museographic dimension of drinking, with collections of objects from different museums – Udmurt museums in general (Yuliya Maratkanova, Izhevsk), the National Museum in Izhevsk (Mariya Tokareva, Izhevsk), the Museum of the History of Religion in Saint Petersburg (Anna Mutina, Saint Petersburg). The last presentation, made by Aleksandr Vakhrushev (Izhevsk), commented upon gastronomy in the mass media in Udmurtia.

This description of the proceedings of the symposium shows that it was manifold, rich and interdisciplinary. It covered diverse ethnic groups and different aspects of drinking, from material culture to symbolic meaning. Most of the presentations were interesting and well delivered.

The output of this symposium is supposed to be a collective monograph. To date the presentations have been published, although scattered across different issues of different journals. Now there is a wish to give visibility to these proceedings and to have a publication *ad hoc*. The symposium also received wide coverage in the Udmurt and Udmurt language media.

Although the audience was not very extensive, there were still attendants from different institutions, as well as scholars who did not take the floor, students, musicians, folklorists connected to cultural institutions. This aspect could be emphasised and these symposia could attract more of the potentially interested audience. We could also endeavour to increase participation from Estonia, for the comparative potential of these meetings is huge indeed.

Eva Toulouze
(INALCO Paris France),
Nikolai Anisimov
(Estonian Literary Museum)

NOTES

1 The museum covers an area where there was formerly a Russian village and is situated 17 km from Izhesk, the capital of Udmurtia. The Udmurt village of Ludorvay was formerly reputed for an incident in 1929 that started the brutal collectivisation process in Udmurtia.

2 Media coverage includes television news in Udmurt (see Ivor'ës 2018, minutes 7.45–9.00); news in Russian (V Udmurtii 2018); a radio programme in Udmurt (Esh'yas'kon tukogo 2018), and an article in Udmurt in the journal of the Eastern Udmurt, by participant Anna Baydullina (2018). This report is to be added to this list.

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