

CONTEMPORARY MARI BELIEF: THE FORMATION OF ETHNIC RELIGION

TATIANA ALYBINA

PhD, Researcher

Estonian National Museum

Muuseumi tee 2, 60534 Tartu, Estonia

e-mail: tatiana.alybina@erm.ee

ABSTRACT

In this article* I describe the process of developing of Mari ethnic religion based on the tradition of animistic beliefs. I aim to consider two areas of contemporary Mari religion, the activities of the official religious organisation and the vernacular tradition as practiced by people in the countryside. The Mari vernacular belief system has been seen as one of the components of Mari ethnic identity. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Mari religious tradition has played a role in strengthening national identity, and so the religious organisation has been officially registered. Today there is an attempt to adapt Mari religious practices to the conditions of the religious market, in the face of which vernacular tradition seems to lose its connection with the ethnic worldview and rural way of life. My analysis of research material from fieldwork conducted shows the existence of belief rituals that are followed independently from the official Mari religious movement. Contemporary Mari religious tradition has two layers and can be described as a process of transformation from vernacular belief to ethnic religion with its religious institutions and group of experts.

KEYWORDS: ethnic religion • animism • vernacular belief • Mari people • Finno-Ugric ethnology

INTRODUCTION

The European discourse of modern animistic religions includes the variety of New Religious movements with environmentalism component and reconstructions of ‘pagan’ rituals (‘neo-paganism’). Vernacular belief traditions are seen as one of the components of people’s ethnic identity in multinational Russian society. National religious movements based on preserved folk practices raised up in early 1990s as the elements of ‘ethnic mobility’, and being a part of national revival movements are relevant also today.

When talking about preserved folk practices we often refer to European paganism, practiced in the contemporary world and tending to adapt to urban environment

* This article is based on research supported by the Estonian Research Council, grant PUT590 Contemporary Finno-Ugric Animism: Functions and Social Context (2015–2018).

although it is also found in the countryside. In spite of the broad diversity of ideologies and promoted values, these polytheistic movements have an overarching similarity in the way they view the idea of paganism as a mean to counter globalisation. They reject the Abrahamic tradition (Christianity, Islam, Judaism), which has dominated the recent history of Western civilisation, although they still share such common features as the romantic vision of paganism, nature, and the noble savage. In seeking an immanent sacred, these religious movements show a deep concern for nature and the physical world, which often manifests itself in activism in politics and environmentalism. (Aitamurto and Simpson 2013: 2)

In order to define these movements and local religious practices a wide range of terms and narrower concepts are used. Their pantheons of gods often include ancient heroes from local legends, or nature itself is seen as sacral. According to this, I will use a term 'animism' because it includes the opportunity to define them as polytheistic beliefs. The article is focused on Mari animistic tradition, which I will refer to as Mari animistic belief (*marij jüla*, 'Mari traditional practice') and Mari traditional religion.

Contemporary research into 'paganistic' movements in the post-Soviet geographical area has included both the neo-pagan ideologies and animistic traditions that are preserved and practiced in the countryside. Victor Schnirelmann (1998; 2001), Vladimir Napol'skikh (2002), Aleksandr Shchipkov (2003), Boris Knorre (2013), Sergey Shtyrkov (2013) and others explore animistic beliefs within the development of neo-pagan movements. Modern practices of local worship traditions in the Volga region are described in the works of Nikandr Popov (1996; 2002; 2004), Lidiya Toydybekova (1997), Anton Salmin (2007), Ranus Sadikov (2010; 2012), Rushan Saberov (2013), Yekaterina Yagafova (2016), Eva Toulouze and Liivo Niglas (2017) and others. Local beliefs in the Volga region are partly mixed with Christianity, with the majority of the indigenous population following a syncretic tradition; therefore indigenous animistic culture is mainly preserved in remote areas. Mari is one of the Finno-Ugric nations, an indigenous people of the Volga region who have managed to preserve their archaic animistic worship tradition – *marij jüla* – over the centuries and are considered to be one of the most famous keepers of archaic faith in European Russia. The Centre for Mari Traditional Belief, registered in 1991, was one of the first organisations set up to study animistic religion in the post-Soviet countries.

Anthropologist Sonja Luehrmann (2009), studying the activities of religious organisations in the Republic of Mari El during the post-Soviet era, examined aspects of the institutionalisation of Mari worship traditions. She discovered that post-atheist religious ceremonies could be understood by analogy with mobilising events organised by schoolteachers, cultural workers or Komsomol¹ officials during the Soviet period. A significant number of the people who joined religious organisations had previous experience giving lectures or public speeches from that time in connection with their previous fields of activity. As religious leaders, they became methodicians and drew on theological resources to conceptualise the relationship between their former and current work. (Luehrmann 2009: 135–136) Russian researcher Kseniya Gavrilova (2016: 274–277) has described in detail an example of reconstruction of common worship (rituals) in one of the Mari villages in the Kirov region based on participant observation and interviews. In her research she concluded that the principal goal of contemporary Mari religious organisation, which is to unite all Mari under the official institution of Mari Traditional

Religion, could cause an imbalance or lead to conflict when the organisation's representatives came into direct contact with the local community.

In this paper I aim to define the place of Mari belief traditions in the variety of modern animistic movements and to try to determine its role in modern society. Aspects of Mari animistic belief, and its adherents' views, will be explored, and I will analyse the activity of members of the Mari religious organisation and present interviews with tradition bearers who are independent of the official religious movement. Using an understanding of the developing Mari religious institution and the way in which the religious system adapts *marij jüla* customs from the countryside to urban conditions allows me to distinguish the processes through which Mari ethnic religion is forming.

THE TYPES OF THE ANIMISTIC RELIGION

Every region has its own 'portrait' of animistic religion. The concept of religious movements can be based both on reconstruction of the past, and on innovations. In the former the adherents channelled their efforts into the preservation of the traditional way of life, while in the latter they are ready to renew religions and ideologies. The followers of reconstructed animism or neo-paganism can be classified according to that worldview (Koskello 2009: 296–298), which, according to the manifested substantive features of modern animism, is divided into Western and Eastern European forms. Kaarina Aitamurto and Scott Simpson (2013: 3) generalise the categorisation of native faith movements in Europe, according to the data of modern research:

On the whole, the stereotypical Western European type is more concerned with magic and with liberation from traditional gender and sex roles, and many participants lean politically to the left. On the whole, the stereotypical Eastern European type is more concerned with the nation and with local ethnic traditions, and many participants lean politically to the right. Rather than seeking to the clear-cut types, it would be more accurate to see Modern Paganism as a broad spectrum of the overlapping sets of ideologies, practices and communities that share a family resemblance.

Thus, in spite of the differences between the two, it is preferable not to identify them as separate; at the same time it would be inappropriate to talk about them as a single unified movement. The animistic movement is always heterogeneous and contains groups of participants who have liberal, and conservative, views. Thus, the most pronounced characteristics of polytheistic organisations are always conditional. (Ibid.)

Vladimir Napols'kikh (2002: 141–142) notes that animistic movements in Russia started later than in the West due to the domination of communist ideology and its constituent atheism, which both affected the activities of religious institutions and local worship practices. The revival of local beliefs in the Soviet Union started at the end of 1980, with the traditions of the vernacular religious movements developing within various national movements during the post-Soviet period. Since the period of ethnic mobility that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union (and the abolition of atheism) there has been a notable process of turning to ethnic (vernacular) religiosity. Although the Russian population have tended towards Orthodox Christianity since the post-

atheist period began, Russian neo-pagan movements have also unfolded; this follows on from the initial emergence of traditional religious organisations during Perestroika, spurred by the development of the national movements of different peoples (Luehrmann 2009: 105–111; Leete and Shabayev 2010). A significant role in the revival of Mari animistic tradition has been played by the national intelligentsia, who saw this rural spiritual tradition as an important attribute of ethnic identity. Vernacular religious tradition became a pillar of development of national self-consciousness, preserving the Mari language and culture, and, to some extent, the arrival of authentic Mari culture in the urban environment (Chervonnaya 1999: 207; Khristoforova 2007). As a whole, the loss of a unified ideological domain after the collapse of the Soviet Union can be considered the reason for the majority of society turning to religion (Saberov 2013).

Adherents to modern animism in the post-Soviet geographic area can be divided into those who follow the tradition according to a worldview inherited from their family traditions, and those who consciously chose the philosophy, converting from another religion, or, more commonly, from a secular environment. Anastasiya Koskello (2009: 303) determines these two paths as the “patriarchal rural” and “neophyte urban” (“intellectual”) movements. Victor Schnirelmann (2001: 168) calls them “streams”, defining the first as a continuous tradition “coming from the depths of culture” revived in the countryside, and the second type as a book-learned flow, artificially created by the urban intelligentsia and no longer connected with traditional culture. He classifies these types according to ethnicity, noting that some peoples (Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Lithuanians, Latvians and Armenians) use the process of “invention/creation of tradition”, while among others (the peoples of the Volga region, Ossetians and Abkhazians) a peculiar interaction of both tendencies can be observed, and the development of religious processes is more complicated. The process of the “creation of tradition” is noted also in Estonian culture (Västriik 1996; Kuutma 2005: 59–65). The interaction of two types of participant in animistic movements in different cases can be determined as a cooperation or conflict, and even as a combination of both. Peoples of the Volga region, Mari and Udmurt, are given as an example of collaboration between rural and urban traditionalists. The development processes of vernacular religions among these two peoples are noticeably distinguished in the diversity of religious practices that exist in the region today (Schnirelmann 2001: 145–149; Koskello 2009: 303).

At the beginning of the 1990s the Udmurt Vesch, a community of Udmurt traditionalists made up of urban intelligentsia was formed in Udmurtia. The community was engaged in carrying out nationwide prayers in the early post-Soviet period (Shchipkov 2003). Today, Udmurt animistic belief has no particular position among the official religious institutions in the Udmurt republic, being included in folklore festivals and preserved in rural everyday life. The rituals of Udmurt vernacular traditions are more actively practiced in Udmurt villages outside the Udmurt republic, developing as a living ethnic tradition that strengthens Udmurt identity (Siikala and Ulyashev 2011: 311–312; Sadikov 2012; Toulouze and Niglas 2017: 23–24). Mari animist belief, officially registered and with an organisation, has the position of one of the official religions in the Republic of Mari El and influences the popularisation of common worship among the Mari population in the other regions.

THE MARI RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT AND THE BEARERS OF TRADITION

The system of Mari traditional religiosity is manifested through individual and collective nature and ancestor worship ceremonies, as well as worship of the deities local to where people live. At the same time we can say there is also a recognition of the one God within the traditional worldview. According to some studies this could be related to the notion of 'heaven' held before the Finno-Ugric tribes divided (Ragozin 1881: 58; Holmberg 1914: 72–79). The Mari religion has changed over time in the face of Islam and Christianity, sometimes acquiring features from neighbouring religions. The preservation of the local diversity of religious practices in Mari villages – the order of rituals and notions of deities – depends on how patriarchal the local tradition is and how open it is to the influence of other cultures.

Among the rural Mari population the vernacular worldview was preserved during the Soviet period. The practice of collective worship was most fully preserved in most areas of Mari El. The revival of the Mari prayer tradition is associated with the social changes that took place in Russia at the turn of the 1980s and the 1990s. The most significant step in the formation of the Mari ethnic religion was the registration of the first Mari religious centre, Oshmarij-chimarij, in 1991 in Moscow (Toydybekova 1997: 62–76). Representatives of the Mari intelligentsia and social activists turned to folk culture, closely associated with peasant lifestyle and customs, rooted in the pre-Soviet period. At the same time, the official registration of the Mari faith community took the rituals of local belief to the level of the 'high' (official) religions. The members of Mari religious organisation were both members of the urban intelligentsia² and village elders (who had the role of pagan priests or *karts* when leading the worship ceremonies), and also younger adherents of the Mari faith, who were supporters of the restoration of the Mari animistic tradition.

Since the beginning of the 2000s the Mari religious movement has been called the Mari Traditional Religion (MTR)³ receiving the status of third official religion in the Republic of Mari El (after Orthodox Christianity and Islam) (Knorre and Konstantinova 2010). Several local religious communities were formed in the districts of Mari El and later the central organisation was registered in the capital city, Yoshkar-Ola. The condition of the religious market contributed to the formation of institutionalised structures in the traditions of Mari belief, which is not natural for rural animist worship customs, and facilitated its adaptation to the urban environment, changing the pre-existing circumstances. This process encouraged the formation of a group of official experts in the Mari religion, who shape the official 'Mari religion' and improve its development. Interaction between the 'official Mari religion' and less structured rural animist traditions happens on the level of interrelationships between the bearers of tradition, adherents of the religious movement and the leaders of worship ceremonies.

THE FORMATION OF THE ETHNIC RELIGION

According to Mari customs rituals are conducted outdoors in village or clan sacred groves, and also at home. Since the Mari religious organisation was formed, the ques-

tion about the need for Mari worship houses in the city has been raised in discussions from time to time. The question of the need of the 'Mari Traditional Religion' for a building is contentious among worshippers. Some consider the establishment of a special building a step towards a resemblance to world religions. On the other hand, a house of worship is needed not so much as a space for worship ceremonies, but as a place to be used by the MTR's official organisation, something that could be solved if the organisation rented a room. One of my informants sees the function of the worship house as being a place to gather for the beginning and ending prayer ritual (of the worship ceremonies that take place in natural surroundings), which currently usually happens at one of the local villager's houses.

T. A.: They say that it's necessary to build a house of worship. Is it?

Informant: The place for worship ceremonies... The modernisation of religion is always going on anyway, as it should be, [because] everything is changing. We didn't have a house of worship before, but people used to leave from a house in order to go to worship. So, they would choose a house [in the village], and say "we will pray today in your house and then go out to the grove". So, for example in Yoshkar-Ola, why do we need a worship house there? It's just that we don't have a place to leave from [to go worship] and go back to afterwards. Because you also need to pray after coming back [from the grove], but we don't have anywhere to return. That's how we end up breaking the very canons of religion. *Karts* should go out to worship from one house and return to the same place afterwards. They gather there together, pray, and then leave for home from that house. When the worship ceremony is done, they go back there again. The next day they'll gather there again, at the end of the week they also need to gather there in order to pray. A week after [the day of worship] it is necessary to recite the words of worship again. But now we do not do it, so we are breaking [the tradition] because there's no house for that purpose in Yoshkar-Ola. In the villages, they do it – the whole ritual. It is so because there you need to turn to home deities, protectors. (FM 2)

Although officially MTR communities in the districts function independently, the MTR central organisation, headed by the main Mari pagan priest (the main *kart*), is the religious institution's main structural unit. It is hard to estimate the exact number of local communities, as they have right to conduct their activities without official registration. However, the official status of the religious community offers advantages to those who participate in the social and economic programs of the republic. For example, legally registered local MTR communities are able to get financial support for the renovation of the sacred grove within the framework of the cultural heritage protection programme, leading to 16 sacred groves where the biggest collective, or 'worldwide' (Mar. *tünja*), ceremonies are conducted, being renovated. Most of these groves are marked by the official Mari faith organisation as having national significance. They are organised under the auspices of the MTR central community and the republic's administration (Doklad 2014).

The paperwork necessary when working as an organisation poses a challenge for rural village elders and younger *karts* and so some local communities declined the legal status of organisation after the national heritage protection programme was completed. However, for some individuals the legal status of the religious community is

important as it could prevent a possible negative attitude toward the community's activity.

T. A.: Is there a distinction between registered and non-registered communities?

Informant: Why wouldn't there be? Why wouldn't we make a distinction? If we have a legal registration, we can go everywhere, we can go to any region [to hold worship ceremonies]. But without registration, where would we go, because we... [The ceremonies] could be carried out, but the fact is that we... how to say... We don't need to be afraid of anything if we are legally registered. Why should we fear? We should pray to god for all the people, carry out worship ceremonies. Without registration, it doesn't work that well, there's... There's even a chance we'd be chased away, like in the past: "Where are your documents? Perhaps, you are impostors of some sort! What if you are some sort of sect or something, like the Baptists?" (FM 5)

Thus, the registration of a religious organisation provides an official status and legalises the Mari faith community's activities in its interactions with other religious denominations that function in the territory of the republic. The *karts*, who are involved in the communities, promote the networking of the activists within the religious movement across different regions. This helps enable the restoration of common prayers in the villages where this tradition has been lost. Villagers turn to the main pagan priest with a request to send someone to help them conduct the seasonal prayer in their village. Depending on the preserved customs a visiting *kart* conducts the ceremony according to the local, or his own village's, tradition if there is no one (from among the elders) who can remember the structure of the prayer. Kseniya Gavrilova (2016: 188–207, 231–232) describes an example of inviting a *kart* to a Mari village in the Kirov region in the 2000s. The *kart* of Oshmarij-chimarij conducted yearly the autumn sacrifice ceremonies. These common ceremonies were not organised for several years after he stopped visiting them. The village prayers in the sacred grove were resumed in 2007, when a pagan priest from the MTR organisation started to come and conduct worship rituals, adopting the practices of Mari El and raising the possibility of registering a local MTR community. For this purpose there it was necessary to find a local man who could take the role of *kart* and lead further worship ceremonies in the region. However, there were no local initiatives to form a Mari religious community. Some people in Mari villages in the Kirov region attend church, while some try to combine Mari and Christian traditions, in spite of negative feedback from the clergymen. Therefore, the suggestion of establishing a local MTR organisation was not accepted, and since then one seasonal ceremony a year seems to be enough to maintain Mari belief traditions.

Sometimes a visiting pagan priest learns about the details of local worship traditions from the village elders and tries to follow them fully. During fieldwork in the Mari villages on the border of the Mari El Republic and the Kirov region I observed the summer prayer ceremony, led by a visiting *kart* from Mari El. The worship ceremony started in the evening, according to local custom, and finished with a common prayer held in the morning, as local elders remember it (FM 3). Therefore, in some cases the ceremony can be reconstructed and the order of the ritual unified according to the competency of the leader. The process of unification is guided by books that focus on the Mari animistic customs, and also on the courses and seminars that the *karts* give and which are organised by the central organisation of the MTR (Saberov 2013: 266; FM 3; FM 5).

The activity of members of the Mari religious organisation can differ considerably from the function of local *karts* in the villages. In addition to leading seasonal prayers, the leaders of the MTR organisation conduct seminars and meetings of young *karts*, take part in social activities and maintain horizontal contacts between local MTR communities in Mari El and outside the region. A hierarchy of religious experts transforms the process of the natural public choice of a local elder by the native community. It is possible to become a *kart* after joining the religious organisation and participating in the seminars and courses, and thereafter to participate as an assistant in sacrificial worship. After some time the leaders of the Mari religious centre can decide about the neophyte's ability to lead smaller collective worship himself. The official religious organization's primary *kart* can also accept local elders and worships leaders into the MTR community, publicly giving them the attributes of pagan priests within the MTR – a handmade hat made from the felt (*terkupsh*) and an embroidered shirt with Mari ornaments.

Adherents and leaders of Mari prayer rituals from the other regions where Mari live, gradually join the religious movement. Therefore today there are also MTR communities outside of Mari El. Mari priests from Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Sverdlovsk Oblast and other regions together with priests from Mari El lead the worship ceremonies in the 'worldwide' sacred groves of the republic. In this case the network developed by members of Mari belief communities is aligned with the network of activists from Mari social and cultural non-governmental organisations.

In parallel with Mari religious organisations developing their structures, the popularisation of the organisation's activities in the media also began, something that can be clearly seen from the example of information about upcoming worship ceremonies. The day of the seasonal prayer ceremony used to be chosen by local elders shortly before the ceremony, whereas now the dates are approved in advance for the forthcoming year. As a rule, the prayer calendar is made and approved by the leaders of the religious organisation. Due to the insufficient number of pagan priests available for village prayers days were chosen in some places that were unsuitable according to the lunar calendar. It is possible to know about the time and a place of most upcoming common prayers from the publications in the Mari newspaper or webpages at the beginning of the season.⁴ The new method of announcing common worship does not comply with the previous custom, i.e. people should not be invited to the sacred ceremony because they should be there of their own accord, having received the information locally.

Today announcements about forthcoming sacrifice ceremonies change the usual rhythm of the ceremonies, for example attracting visitors from far away to the sacred groves. On the one hand, this introduces Mari animist traditions to a wider range of people; on the other hand it could be inconvenient for believers. Major ceremonies attract many journalists and other people who want to see 'pagan traditions'. The presence of a large number of visitors who are not familiar with the culture of behaviour in a sacred grove can affect the atmosphere of the ceremony for local residents.

Informant 1: So, Petro's Day⁵ is coming up soon. I think that so many young people are now coming out on Petro's Day that it even seems like a festival.

T. A.: But do they know or follow the traditions?

Informant 1: Whether they follow them or not, they are there as though... As though

they came out for *Peledysh Pairem* [Mari summer festival], that's what it seems like to me.

Informant 2: Yes, it also seems like that to me. (FM 3)

With the Mari religious organisation's increasing control of all Mari worship ceremonies, these ceremonies are now organised every year. According to the informants' words, in the Mari faith tradition prayers are held to maintain family wellbeing; usually people need to worship gods in the sacred grove once every three years. Participation in the large prayer ceremonies every year is not part of the tradition (FM 1; FM 3; FM 5). Instead of participating in common worship, some believers prefer to visit the sacred place at other appropriate times: "I do not go to pray to God when there are big crowds of people. I prefer to go alone [to the worshipping place]" (FM 5). Thus, in becoming more popular to people from farther away, larger common worship ceremonies take on the function of secular meetings. As some sacred groves become particularly popular, several local Mari religious communities made the decision to forbid filming and photography at the locations of the worship rituals. In front of the symbolic 'gates' to the sacred groves it is possible to see notices with the rules of conduct in the grove and dress code requirements (FM 5).

Therefore, the activities of the Mari religious organisation lead to a synthesis of Mari prayer customs. The conception of the development of the system of Mari belief depends on the leaders of the religious movement that is represented by the structure of religious organization. However, there are some villages where Mari belief traditions are followed without any interaction with the official MTR religious movement.

MARI RITES AND ANIMISTIC WORLDVIEW

Mari traditional belief rites fit most naturally with a rural lifestyle. This could explain why the 'pagan worldview' in the countryside seems relatively conservative and patriarchal compared with ideas of the animistic communities in cities. Mari faith rituals carried out within local communities are conditioned by the idea of a link with the motherland and with the ancestors (ancestral roots). In this regard, it should be noted that local differences in Mari faith tradition appear not only because of the geographical dispersion of the people. The diversity of local traditions depends on the worship traditions of local deities (patrons), which stand out as separate from common ancestor worship traditions. In addition, archaic forms of worship ritual are preserved at different levels, depending on to what degree the Mari people interact with other cultures.

The trend of rites becoming unified, as well as the 'mobility' of MTR priests (and the possibility of their participation) in organising ceremonies in one or other sacred grove is one of the points of conflict between supporters of 'high' Mari religion and adherents of belief tradition as part of daily rural life. Rural prayer traditions have been preserved as individual prayer practices and village ceremonies in local ritual places, as well as rites of ancestor worships (FM 1). The elders, who are recognised by the village people, lead seasonal prayers related to agriculture activities. The elders and all the participants are well acquainted with the customs of preparing and conducting the prayer ritual. Followers of the tradition who live in the city can always visit their villages to hold worship ceremonies. When preserving family worship customs, Mari individuals liv-

ing very far away from their native region take part in ceremonies when visiting their relatives, and in fact will plan the visit close to the date when the ceremony is to be conducted, depending on the local ritual calendar. (FM 4)

The religious belief traditions of the Mari, and the *Mari jüla* custom and its variations, which have been elevated to the status of official Mari religion, are not always seen as identical. One of the representatives of the Mari intelligentsia, reflecting on the Mari traditional worldview and belief customs, described the constructed MTR as a structural organisation, separate from the living tradition. In his opinion religion is a hierarchy, and therefore the usage of concept 'Mari religion' is not appropriate – it would be better to describe it as 'traditional belief', the 'Mari tradition', 'God's custom', 'God's lifestyle'. The last three are based on Mari language definitions of the Mari faith: *marij jüla* ('Mari custom') and *marij jumyn jüla* ('Mari godly custom'). My informant assumes that in modern MTR practice, a person performs the ceremony or participates in it formally. The example of possible formal participation in the worship ceremony, with its appointment of a prayer leader/leading person for communication with the higher powers, was addressed as being in parallel with religious services in world confessions: "They serve in religion, hold religious services. They serve in the army, in the police... And there is no [hierarchical] subordination in Mari belief custom. I'm angry when they confuse religion and Mari faith." (FM 2)

Thus, any strengthening of the role of mediator in Mari faith ceremonies is assessed negatively, since people visiting the prayer ceremony out of curiosity seem to shift interaction with the deity to the ceremony leader rather than the individual, who should be attending the prayer process with his or her soul. In Mari faith customs, practiced as a part of the traditional worldview, every person is seen as able to turn to God him- or herself. The benefits of prayer are possible when in the right mood, a process that does not always need to be complemented with a ritual.

That's why she [the informant's aunt] would say to us: "oh, this time my trip to the [sacred] hill went well, the family is doing well, everything is in order," she would say. And now, approaching her age at the time, I understand why she would say that. It means that back then, in 1991, she went to worship with a [sacrificial] goose in the Morki [sacred] hills – and at that moment, her soul was open. But what if it went like this: maybe she was in bad mood; maybe she missed her bus, and then sacrificed the goose in a hurry... She didn't say it, probably, but thought to herself: oh, it went like this [...]. At that time, I was a little child, I didn't know, and now... with age, I understand why she would say that. If, say, she was praying intensely, said the words of worship, then her soul, her heart was opened to God's heart. But if it is closed, if you want to finish the ritual in a hurry and run to catch the bus, well then, the results will be just like that. That is how it should be. But I know for sure, Tanya, if I ask something from God, if I really need it and ask for help, the help will come. But if I worship in this [other] mood, then I know that I am just wasting time. So it means, you have to be, to enter into the right state. In the state of connection with God, when your soul is open – this is the first rule. (FM 2)

I did my fieldwork in Mari villages over several years, during the season of the prayer ceremonies. Communicating with people while they were preparing for a ceremony, joint participation in rituals and conversations about Mari belief after visiting sacred

groves allowed me to ask my informants about the meaning of preserved rites in their lives. Apart from the explanation of the preserved tradition as simply following the customs of their ancestors, the arguments of my informants also contain elements of self-analysis, a critical evaluation of the efficiency and the result of religious rituals. One of my informants' discussions of maintained tradition was as follows:

And here in the sacred grove my father... also used to worship, he also used to pray in the grove and at home for us. And we also do it outside every three years. Since my husband died, we have not yet gone out to worship so far. My husband's father also was a *kart*. And now the tradition continues with us. We believe that it helps us...with sickness... it does... how to say... well, it helps us heal ourselves without medicines. Maybe we convince ourselves: if we go there, that's it, we are healthy. Maybe it is because of that... We are used to it, and we have to do it. If suddenly something bad happens, some misfortune... We think: "Ah! We didn't do the job, we were late, that's why we are ill." So then we promise a sacrifice:⁶ offer some coins, goose feathers. And in the same year we go out to worship. If you don't do it in time, something bad will happen: you'll break your leg or your arm... And that's when you start thinking: see, we didn't do the job, that is why a misfortune happened to us. And then later on we do the work [perform the ritual]. (FM 5)

A similar attitude towards religious rites was demonstrated in one of the stories told by a pagan priest, in which traditional requirements (relating to the types the sacrificial animal required) were not met. According to his story, the ceremony dedicated to the main god (*Tüŋ Jumo*) is traditionally carried out in two stages. A bull and a horse were sacrificed during the main prayer. A second ceremony is then held on the seventh Day⁷ to complete the ritual. After the main prayers, the local priest was in doubt about the need to make another sacrifice of "the gift with horns and hoofs". After some dispute, instead of "cattle with hoofs", which is usual for this type of prayer, "winged animals" (five geese) were sacrificed.

God got mad at us. In our region, in Jangranur region, there was a disaster this year, roofs were broken and there was a big hailstorm. Our worship ceremony went very well, but during the seventh Day prayer, an argument broke out. This is why all that happened. The god of thunder and lightning sent us a hailstorm; the hail was the size of eggs, chicken eggs even. (FM 5)

This big hailstorm, which happened to be a disaster for the people, is described as punishment for violation of the ritual's norms. It can be assumed that along with the memory of the pagan priest, other adherents of animism could explain the weather disaster in other ways connected with human behaviour in the context of their interaction with deities.

At the time of religious persecution during adaptation of worship practices to the changed conditions the place and time of the ceremonies also changed. In some local communities the tradition of holding night prayers appeared. Nightfall allowed the sight of believers visiting the grove to be hidden; in this way the time of worship fitted the schedule of work on state farms and reduced the risk of being persecuted by the local administration (FM 4). In comparison with collective worships the custom of family (or kinship) prayer is preserved in Mari villages more widely. This can be explained

by the possibility of hiding the ritual and practicing it at home. Family worship moved from the sacred groves into the territory of the household.

Back in the day, our mothers and fathers would go into the forest. Now it is not possible to go to that forest, there is no road and water is very far, so now everyone moved them [the worship ceremonies] to their homes. Nobody goes to the forest now, they all took it [the ceremonies] home, and they do it at home. (FM 5)

Home worship ceremonies were held in close-knit family circles. The main place for the ritual was the *kudo*, which is a small wooden building with an earthen floor and a fire-place or stove in the centre, with a hole for smoke in the roof. In everyday life the *kudo* was also used as a place to prepare food for domestic animals, thus there were no clear signs of ritual space for strangers. Currently the *kudo* is very rarely preserved in Mari farms, although the fire in the Russian stove inside the house can play a role during home worship rituals. The tradition of family prayers does not involve the participation of strangers.

Nobody should visit the house during this time. When we go out to worship, it should only be us, the family and... relatives from my mother's side would come to us. When my mother's relatives go out to worship, we go with them – it goes this way. They would go once every three years, we would go every three years. Now, we didn't go recently, we should do it this year. (FM 5)

The family elder leads the home worships. The Mari priest is invited when there is no one who can lead the prayer ritual, which illustrates the interruption of the home worships in the family. In this case the official status of the invited Mari priest has no significance. His authority as a worship leader is based on the villagers' attitude to him and his own knowledge of the ritual. If the eldest family member is a woman, she often leads the family prayer herself. If a competent elder man is absent, she can also lead the common worship ceremony for the village prayers.

My husband fell ill towards the end; his mind didn't work so well anymore, so then I helped him perform worship ceremonies. It's a done thing, they say, for women to go out to worship wearing the [priest's] hat. For now we still have Maksimych [Nikolay Maksimych], I want to ask him [to lead the worship ceremony]. [...] In Marisola village one of my in-laws performed ceremonies herself well into old age. She would always wear the hat.⁸ So me too, if I don't find someone to lead the ceremony, I think I will carry out the worship ritual myself.

T. A.: Is there only one *kart*, Nikolay Maksimovich, in your village?

Informant: Well, he is considered to be a *kart* here, but also there are younger men performing ceremonies, those born in 1960 or 1961, they go out [to worship] with their family, but they don't do it for other people. (FM 5)

According to informants, prayer rituals can also be transferred today from natural sacred places to people's homes. For example, in the Sernursky district of Mari El most of the people attending village prayers moved the ritual to their homes because the ritual place near the village became waterlogged. Therefore, over the last few years the ritual of summer prayers has been held in the form of home prayers, with the villagers conducting sacrifice rituals in their *kudos* on a certain day, and only a few people continuing to gather at the old place (FM 5). The common worship ceremony of mid-summer

is held every year in the village of Uncho (Shorunzha) in the Morkinsky area, on July 12. People from different regions gather to participate in the prayer. Because many strangers come to the ceremony, some local families prefer to go to the same sacred grove on another day to hold the summer sacrifice ceremony in more private conditions.

Poultry is sacrificed in autumn worship rituals, held in gratitude for a good harvest and with a request for a peaceful winter. The main gifts are geese, which are 'allowed' to the god during the autumn worship season.

Informant: Nowadays they worship at home, sacrifice a goose [...]. Nobody goes far now, they make a sacrifice at home, by themselves.

T. A.: Is it possible to hold the ritual at any time?

Informant: Only in autumn, in autumn they make sacrifices. They heat the oven and burn all the feathers in the fire. Then they eat the goose only with family members. They do not throw any part away, not even bones can be given to dogs. Everything is burned in the fire. It's only for the family.

T. A.: Is it necessary to invite a priest?

Informant: No, you do it only with your own family, so if I know how to do it myself, then I do it myself... If I don't know then I would invite Misha Kazantsev [a local *kart*], then invite all my family – my sons and daughters-in-law, my children, that is. Only they will come, there will be no neighbours or any other people. (FM 3)

In addition to this home worship is a necessary part of any other bigger prayer ceremony. Adherents turn to god with prayer words in a chosen house in the village before going to the sacred grove. The cycle of the prayer ritual also finishes in a chosen house after the collective worship ceremony in the grove.

Before holding a common worship ritual the main organisers of the prayer event are determined. They deal with main issues of preparing the ritual in the grove, uniting inhabitants of one or several neighbouring villages. The main prayer house is chosen in one of the villages and all the food, sacrificial animals and utensils that are needed are collected there. The mistress of the house sets out kvass, ritual bread and pancakes from the groceries brought by the villagers a day before the ritual. She lays the ritual table and *karts* gather in the house to pray before going to the sacred place (for example a grove, a sacred hill) to conduct a collective worship ceremony. After the worship, the Mari priests return to the main house to complete the ritual by addressing the deities with gratitude for the successfully conducted prayer ceremony. The cycle of prayer practice ends after a week, when another home ceremony related to the collective prayer ritual is held in this house.⁹ It can be noted that some parts of the collective prayer ritual remain unseen by the majority of the participants. Some traditionalists join to the Mari religious movement through the introduction of the official MTR organisation. Therefore, their understanding of *marij jüla* is considered to be rather superficial as it is merely an acquaintance with the external attributes and form of collective worship.

The popularisation of local sacred groves and the increasing number of visitors at prayer ceremonies cause conflicting attitudes among the villagers. According to the traditional Mari worldview, a person is connected with his or her ancestors through their common (native) land. Therefore, the elements of pilgrimage associated with visiting the sacred groves in different places and participating in different local ceremonies creates a new element of the religious mindset in the MTR (FM 1; FM3). A person follow-

ing his or her ancestral prayer tradition is considered protected by the forces of the land and should conduct worship rituals on his ancestral land.

T. A.: And what about announcements [about the worship ceremonies] on the local radio?

Informant: People should probably pray in the region where they live. Now they say on the radio that people go to Chumbylat mountain¹⁰ and other distant places. But does he [the national legendary hero Chumbylat] know us? We have our own god here, he probably knows us. People travel so far; they go there from our village, from Uncho village, to pray. (FM 3)

In the districts where people keep Mari animist rites, the leaders of the official MTR community are seen not as traditional faith elders, but mainly as public social activists. The collective summer prayer ceremony in the village of Uncho is one of the most famous summer ceremonies in which an MTR pagan priest takes part. Apart from the elders, members of the local MTR community and *karts* from other districts, including the main priest, can attend. Among the local believers there are ideas about the possible ineffectiveness of a ritual conducted by a 'non-native' priest. My interlocutors' lack of trust in the 'city' *karts* was expressed in conversation as follows:

Informant 1: Marina said this to Tanygin [the principal MTR *kart*]... She just came to him and said: "Don't pray for the city, don't pray for these... Where do you pray [lead worship ceremonies]? So, pray this way," she said. [...] "Don't stand like this while praying, pray for us like this," she said. She, Marina, said that, right when she came to the place of worship.

T. A.: And what did Tanygin say to that?

Informant 1: He didn't say anything, what would he say?

Informant 2: What would he say, what can he say? These days people do not like big worship ceremonies.

Informant 1: Nobody likes that, nobody likes that, and people don't like it when so many strangers come. (FM 3)

In the following quote my informant mentions visiting *karts* as "popes", associating them with the representatives of the official religious structure and different from the local elders leading the ritual.

Informant 1: So then people go to the groves, and popes are coming from afar, aren't they? And our local people say then – ah, they came to take the rain away from our area, that's why there is no rain, that's what they'll say.

Informant 2: They say many things these days.

Informant 3: You can now pray for the whole world.

Informant 1: Where could they take it? The things people say around here... We talk like that just to kill time. People pray to the god of the Universe, it's not only local, is it? Nowadays, you know, even Tatars come. Tatars offer domestic animals as sacrifice. They say: "Tatars didn't use to come before, now Tatar people are coming [to take part in Mari ceremonies] and God got confused, all mixed up with the Tatars", they say. So what, people also marry Tatars, I say. People also marry Russians, I say, that's why the world became like this, I say. And Mari people go so far, getting married with anyone, with different nations... My son-in-law is Tatar too. (FM 3)

It should be noted that my informants are not always critical. In the context of my research I paid more attention to the way they reacted to the alterations occurring in the religious structure and rites system. Generalising discussions about belief customs and perpetuation of Mari culture, my informants mainly noted, "there is at least this". They certainly realize that you cannot stop time and keep everything as it was in the "ancient time". The attention that older people pay to the small elements of maintaining worship rituals and the way they take to heart the discrepancies between the MTR and the "ancestors' faith" demonstrates the predominance of spiritual over secular identity issues.

CONCLUSION

The on-going transformation of Mari religious tradition includes the changes in the belief system and the way in which ritual leaders are organised. The perception and evaluation of this process is different according to the attitude of the older generation and the newly joined Mari believers. Internal conflict and misunderstanding between participants in the religious movement appear at the frontier of ritual practices and worldview. For some adherents to Mari belief customs it is a part of a daily routine in the countryside, for others it is a clear sign of a separate religious tradition and a component of their identity. The leaders of the religious movement are transforming the structure of the religious system in order to prevent its assimilation into modern multicultural environment. At the same time the tradition is changing under the influence of interaction with other religious movements and social processes.

To sum up, there are two components of the modern Mari religious tradition. The developing layer of natural Mari ritual practice can be considered a continuation of the aboriginal animistic ritual. The development of the official MTR can be considered a process of distinguishing 'high' religion from popular belief tradition. These two layers are components of the same animistic belief, although each of them is developing at its own pace and in a different way, and both are being adopted by society as religious practices.

The top layer is the activity of the MTR religious organisation and the official religious movement, which occurs as a more visible layer and is highlighted in the Media information space in Mari El and beyond. Official Mari faith is an important component of ethnic identity in the fight against assimilation processes as well as being a way to present the Mari people as a nation with a unique animistic tradition. The second layer is closer to the traditional life of rural society. Nature worship, observing taboos, superstitions, seasonal prayers and ancestor veneration are perceived as part of everyday life, and fit naturally into the rhythm of Mari village life.

Both layers of modern Mari religion interact with and influence each other, being parts of the same phenomenon. They cannot be considered two separate religious phenomena, although they should be differentiated from each other at this stage of the development of the Mari religious movement in Mari El. When separating the layers of contemporary Mari religion one can see different levels and speeds of transformation, a partial combination of rituals, and some cases of conflict when vernacular and officially registered Mari animism intersect.

NOTES

1 Komsomol – the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League (in Russian *Vsesoyuznyy leninskiy kommunisticheskiy soyuz molodëzhi*) was a political organisation in the Soviet Union for people who were still too young to become members of the Communist Party.

2 It is worth noting that when considering Mari society, the definition of ‘intelligentsia’ does not imply the isolation of its representatives from peasant culture, since there is no relevant ‘purely urban’ Mari population. Mari language proficiency and ethnic self-determination presupposes maintenance of a connection with rural folk culture. Therefore, it is natural that the keepers of Mari religious rituals and the intelligentsia interact with each other and cooperate in the vernacular religious movement.

3 This definition is the official label of the Mari native faith in Russian (*Mariyskaya traditsionnaya religiya*). In Mari the definition *marij jüla* or *marij jumyn jüla* (‘Mari godly custom’) is used.

4 Information about forthcoming prayers is transmitted through the Mari-language media. See, for instance, Kuklina 2013; MariUver 2013; Lastochkina 2014; MariUver 2015; MariUver 2017.

5 Midsummer worship ceremonies on July 12, the date coincides with the Day of St. Peter and Paul on the Orthodox Calendar.

6 To “promise a sacrifice” means to promise to make an offering to the gods if your request is granted. Part of the future gift (in this case a goose) is put in a small bag, which is hung on the wall under the ceiling. The promise is fulfilled in the autumn, when the worship ceremony with the promised gift is carried out (FM 4; FM 5).

7 The day when some worship rituals are repeated, a week after the main sacrifice.

8 Wearing the hat means to take the role of a man, as women usually wear a headscarf. If a woman wears men’s clothes, she can engage in men’s activities; leading the worship ceremony is the function of a leader of a family or kinship group, i.e. an older man.

9 The role of the main house is described using the example of participant observation fieldwork material while preparing and conducting a prayer ceremony on the sacred hill of Chumbylat in June 2013 (FM 5).

10 Chumbylat mountain is the sacred hill, outside of the Republic of Mari El, in Kirov region, where common summer worship ceremonies are held every year.

SOURCES

Author’s fieldwork material:

FM 1 – Author’s fieldwork material collected on joint expedition with the *Evseev National Museum of the Republic Mari El*, Zvenigovo district, republic of Mari El, 2011.

FM 2 – Author’s fieldwork material collected on expedition to Yoshkar-Ola, Republic of Mari El in July 2012.

FM 3 – Author’s fieldwork material collected on expedition to Morki districts of Mari El republic in July 2012.

FM 4 – Author’s fieldwork material collected on expedition to Malmyzh district in Kirov region July 2012.

FM 5 – Author’s fieldwork materials collected on expeditions to Sernur and Sovet districts of Mari El republic, July–August 2013.

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