

culture and traditions have limits. They cannot be overstepped as that would trigger off the process of disintegration followed by impoverishment of the spiritual life of an individual and a people.

Cultural values are the birthright of the whole humanity. As a specific mechanism of transmitting experience, skills, cultural, moral and other values, cultural traditions play a very important role in the formation of an individuality. That is why we can say the degree of the safe-keeping of traditions reflects the level of the nation's culture.

The concern for culture is the concern for the present and the future of an individual and a nation. The development of culture is the guarantee of resolving today's pressing problems, preserving nations' individualities, which paves the way for constant improvement.

## THE CHARACTER OF KEREMET IN THE MARI MYTHOLOGY

Lydia Toidybekova. Yoshkar-Ola, Mari

Ghosts called by the general name *Keremet* are considered by nearly all researchers to be evil creatures, whose the aim is exclusively to cause harm to people.<sup>1</sup> It was not quite so in reality. P. Glezdnev has written in his article: *Special ghosts, called by the general name Keremet, protect the whole family.*<sup>2</sup> This was said about the Maris of Belebeyev region. The idea of Keremet in the other regions of the Mari Republic was the same. A Mari was very proud of paying homage to Keremet. There is an example about a Mari boasting to have a Keremet:

*Hey you, what a man are you? You're lost. Look at me, I have a Keremet! After these words the other Mari wanted to obtain a Keremet by all means. He built a fence around the grave and began to make sacrifices (the village of Susadi-Abalock, Byrsk).*<sup>3</sup>

V. Filonenko has registered a legend which says that the worship of Keremet was determined by the god Yumo-Keremet, who was considered to be Keremet's younger brother who always resisted him.<sup>4</sup> But there existed not a single, but a large number of keremets, each having his own name. It was Yakovlev<sup>5</sup> who gave them these names. In honour of those Keremets there were special groves and mountains (Keremet Arch, Keremet Hill).<sup>6</sup> With the Chuvash people Keremet

was considered to be the elder brother of the god Suldy-Tora, but people killed him. To beg for mercy for their crime, they begin to worship him.<sup>7</sup> With some Tatars Keremet was a special sacred place.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, there cannot be simultaneously existing opposite ideas about one and the same mythological character. The modern idea of the Meadow Mari people about Keremets as cruel ghosts is not original, but a later one, considering the alien origin of Keremet. The Eastern Maris were less subjected to Christianity, and therefore they preserved the original idea of Keremets as guardian spirits in a number of places up to the present day. This can be proved by the collected legends.

*Some time ago a Mari gave his first child to Keremet. Once, when he was ready to sacrifice his child to Keremet, he turned around and saw a ram. After that he began to sacrifice domestic animals.*

From this legend we come to the conclusion that a Mari had to sacrifice his first child to Keremet.

*There is the Mountain of Keremet Bulda near Byrgynda village, Karakulynski district of Udmurt region. Lush green grass grows on the mountain. The native inhabitants never mow grass there. An old man called Nikifor lives in this village. Every year he puts on his white shirt and trousers, and goes to this mountain to mow grass. But some religious people worship Bulda; on holidays they go to this mountain to pray together with the Udmurt people.*

In this narrative the old man Nikifor has preserved the original idea of Keremet as a kind of guardian spirit.

At the same time, some of the Meadow and Hill Maris believed the idea of keremet as a cruel ghost.

*Keremet is a soul of cruelty on earth. He sends frosts in winter, droughts and storms in summer, diseases and cattle-plague to people.*

Here Keremet is identified with cruel ghosts of natural primordial forces. According to the Chuvash folk belief, Keremet is either a cruel, hungry ghost, sending people various troubles, extorting sacrifices, or else, it is a place where people pay homage. Sometimes he is associated with sacred things, protecting people from Keremet's machinations. Sometimes the Chuvash people imagined him as a devil.

According to V. Magnitsky keremets are the ghosts of the people killed violently. Modern Chuvash researcher N. Romanov is of the same opinion.<sup>9</sup>

*In old times God sent special organisers to all peoples for keeping an eye on, and taking care of, their lives (ülysh-to-vlak, distributors). After fulfilling their task, the organisers began to disappear; they disappeared from among the Mari people, too.*

*Once upon a time a Mari saw one of the Keremets by chance and asked his help in housekeeping. The God's envoy had promised to help, but did not come. The next time the Mari saw him near a birch-tree, he again asked him to come. The envoy replied, 'If you need me, come here and call me.' After that meeting the Mari never saw him. The Mari people called such God's envoys 'keremets'. There were as many keremets as there were God's envoys. (the village of Ismeyevo, Byrsk region).*

Thus, the Maris thought that although the organisers of life called keremets had gone, they continued to help invisibly. There are quite a lot of stories about it.

*A Mari from Kaleyev village, Bashkir region, while in the army, each day made sacrifices to his Keremet-protector Sherdan and asked him to save him from the enemy's bullets. It was therefore, he believed, that he had managed to avoid all the dangers of the war and survive.*

*Another Mari from the same village, returning home late at night, was attacked by runaways who disappeared after a long, vain search. The saved Mari stayed in wait for some time, then stepped out on the road. The runaway people saw him again, but could not catch him.*

Up to the present time in the consciousness of religious people Keremet signifies a rude and hostile force.

The origin of the word 'keremet' is not clear, anyway. Some researchers associate the notion with the Islamic ideology, in which *Keremet* means 'a miracle', the Holy Ghost. Finnish scientist Albert Hämäläinen (earlier, Heikki Paasonen), and M. Vasilyev are in this opinion. As for V. Sboev, he believes that the Chuvash 'keremet' comes from Arab 'gyuremet' (protected, holy). According to N. Marr the word *keremet* means 'god', as the Georgian 'kerp', Armenian 'karapet', etc.<sup>10</sup>

But Keremet has many images and functions. For example, about Keremet Kürtnovodzhu it is said that he was a runaway soldier; a Mari from Kozmodemyansk District says that he used to live with his brother in the forest, robbed a lot and offended the Mari people. It was difficult to catch them. When at last they were encircled, they climbed an oak on the bank of the Big Yung river and threw themselves into the water; but they threatened the Mari people that even after death they would offend them and cause various diseases.

Some years later a terrible disease appeared, which was regarded as a revenge of the Keremet brothers. The people began to make sacrifices to do them favour. There were other keremets, too: Yar-vodozh, Yausho Keremet, who lived across the Volga river in the forest, Iksa Keremet, and some others.

Yausho Keremet was also a runaway soldier and a robber. He was shot and before his death he predicted that people would make sacrifices to him. It came true, as many of the Mari people who had participated in his beating fell ill.

There is also a legend about Shurma Keremet.

*When Pugachov with his men was encircled by the Russian troops, one of the generals could escape. He rushed out of the forest, stopped and said, Let Keremet be here. Let the Chuvash people worship me. The general was caught and hung on the birch at this place. His horse was grey and the bridle and horseshoes were silver.<sup>11</sup>*

The Mari people narrated that Makar Keremet was a rich farmer. Once he decided to rob the neighbour's plot. To succeed he proposed that the Mari people ask Mother Earth about the debatable rights. The Mari people agreed and Makar's sons, laying hidden in the holes, answered that it was Makar's plot. Makar robbed the plot, but lost his sons, who choked to death in these holes. Makar died at once in grief, but his ghost remained alive on the robbed plot and so Makar's keremet appeared.

According to people's belief, some people do not calm down even after their death. Instead, they turn into especially harmful creatures, and for the sake of fear – into sacred ghosts.

Besides his life, Keremet's appearance and social function also indicate at his human nature. The Chuvash people believed that Keremet had red clothes and red boots and lay on a red bed. Palatkon Keremet (Gornomariisk region), as depicted by the Mari people, is a man in red shirt, sailing on a golden boat along the Sumka River, near his grave. Kürtno-vodyzh rides a troika of brown horses, clothed like an inspector. Melin-Huzya sometimes comes to Maslova village to the Chuvash people, looking like a Tatar with a troika of black horses.

Summing it up, we may draw a conclusion that Keremets were men, they lived and died. They were different from each other in character. Therefore after death they became keremets, benevolent or evil. People were afraid of both, but mostly evil Keremets preserved their name up to our days, as during their life they did a lot of harm to people. They were even those in conflict with the whole world. Among the Keremets you can meet Tatar sheikhs, Mari princes, Chuvash tarkhans, Russian landowners, runaway soldiers, rich farmers, sorcerers and robbers. Because of the harm done to people, they turned in people's consciousness to evil fairy-tale creatures and idols, with fantastic features and mysterious inspired horror.

So this dual idea of these characters as, on the one hand, harmful and disease-causing, but, on the other, curing creatures, was transmitted from family to family. But that was not enough – being afraid of misfortunes or diseases, people began to appease them with sacrifices.

The Mari and the Chuvash people, considering that dead people live the same life as the living and need things which they used during their lives, believed that any harm done by Keremets expresses their wish to profit by sacrificed animals. A sacrifice to Keremet was always like a bribe or a ransom, given by a sick person to be cured.

People's fairy-tales depict Keremet as a creature not only cruel, but always hungry, greedy and voracious. The following story proves it:

*...Keremet sneaked into the Cheremis house in the image of a Cheremis when nobody was in, and began to strangle the mistress of the house, demanding that she give her pancakes. What could she do? The Cheremis cooked the pancakes, but Keremet, having eaten enough and slept, demanded that a cock be fried for him. She left the house only then when a horse was slaughtered for him.*

Only sacrifices could do Keremet favour and neutralise his anger. Therefore in older times beside the holy grove there were single groves or special plots in the forest, where sacrifices were made when some diseases or epidemics had broken in.

Mountain canyons, ravines, bogs, the wilds which frightened man became the places where keremets lived. Nowadays there are still places associated with the name Keremet. For example, in Berezniki village of Volzhsky region, there exists Keremet's ravine (*Keremet korem*), a curl steep slope.

In the middle of the 19th century the Mari people believed in the existence of a whole hierarchy of keremets of different significance. Each of the cruel creatures had its own name and its own field of activity.

With the non-religious Mari people the word '*keremet*' remained as a national expression: on the one hand, Christianity inspired people that all ancient gods were cruel, and on the other hand a gradual development of the elemental-materialistic consciousness formed the atheistic view on the ancient gods.

Genetically, Keremet goes back to cruel characters – demiurges – from the dualistic myths about the creation of the world, and Keremet was the personification of the primordial forces of nature. With the consolidation of patriarchal relations every head of the family became a benevolent guardian spirit *keremet* in the form of a sculptured idol after his death. All the oppressors became cruel ghost-keremets. Here we can agree with N. Nikolsky's opinion, who saw in the worship of Keremet a cult of great-grandfathers, fathers and brothers.<sup>12</sup>

We may come to the conclusion that Keremet, historically appearing on the basis of the cult of natural primordial forces, blends with the cult of benevolent and malevolent people. That is why the faith in Keremet was more stable and widespread than other forms of religious and mythological consciousness.

### Literature

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## **SAINT WORSHIP AND ITS TRANSFORMATION IN THE SLAVIC FOLK CULTURE**

Svetlana Tolstaya. Moscow, Russia

One of the main ideological bases of the archaic Slavic spiritual culture lies in the concept of sainthood. Despite the opposition between the so-called written (or literary) and oral (or folk) cultural patterns, this concept can serve as a