

Magical Practices in the Context of Funeral and Memorial Rituals among the Udmurt

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Abstract: This article examines magical practices in the funeral and memorial rites of the Udmurt, one of the Finno-Ugric peoples of the Volga-Ural region in Russia. Magic is approached as a systemic component of the ritual complex rather than a peripheral or archaic element, drawing on ethnographic and folklore sources from the 19th to 21st centuries and the author's field material from southern and eastern Udmurt communities. The study identifies three interrelated types of magical practice (harmful, protective and healing) and analyses the semantics of key funeral attributes (grave soil, 'corpse water', the clothing and belongings of the deceased, ritual objects and substances) as ambivalent mediators between the worlds of the living and the dead. It demonstrates that magical actions perform regulatory and protective functions, help manage social tensions and sustain sacred and cosmic order, while also tracing the transformation of these beliefs under conditions of religious syncretism and modernisation, including their interaction with Orthodox rituals. The article introduces new empirical material relevant for future comparative research on funeral traditions and magical beliefs in Balkan-Baltic and Finno-Ugric cultural contexts.

Keywords: Udmurt, funeral and memorial rites, magical practices, harmful magic, protective magic, healing magic, religious syncretism.

Introduction

The funeral and memorial rites of the Udmurt¹ are a complex syncretic complex that includes religious, magical, and social components. These practices reflect the archaic worldview of one of the oldest Finno-Ugric peoples in the Urals, where ideas about the soul, ancestral spirits and the boundaries between worlds form a holistic system of interaction between ‘man’, ‘community’ and ‘cosmos’. Magical elements occupy a special place in this system, performing both apotropaic and regulatory-communicative functions, ensuring a balance between the world of the living and the world of the dead.

The formation of traditional Udmurt culture took place in the context of an agricultural and cattle breeding way of life, as well as cultural contact with Slavic, Turkic and Finno-Ugric peoples – Russians, Tatars, Mari, Chuvash, etc. (Kuzeev 1992: 228–229, 275–281; Vladykin 1994: 60–64; Shutova 2018: 5–12). This multi-component environment stimulated the interpenetration of beliefs and ritual forms, while preserving a stable core associated with ancestor worship, sacred topography and mytho-ritual poetry. Within this system, funeral and memorial rites perform not only the function of a transitional ritual, but also the function of sacral maintenance of social and cosmic stability.

The source base includes published materials from the 19th to 21st centuries, as well as the author’s fieldwork materials from the early 21st century, collected mainly among southern and eastern groups of Udmurts. Relying on both textual and field data allows us to consider the phenomenon of magic in dynamics from its traditional form to its modern manifestations.

The aim of the article is to consider magic as a system-forming mechanism of funeral and memorial rites. The analysis is based on three types of magical practice that are consistently present in the ritual structure: harmful, protective, and healing. The study will attempt to clarify their function, semantics, and connection with the collective worldview of the Udmurts, as well as to identify how magical actions construct and maintain the sacred order that ensures balance between the living and the dead. In general, this article attempts to consider the magical components of the funeral and memorial tradition not as relics of ‘folk magic’, but as part of a complex ritual and symbolic language through which the cultural worldview of the Udmurts is expressed and reproduced.

It should be noted that this topic has not previously received special scientific attention, although it has been partially and fragmentarily covered in a number of ethnographic and folklore studies (see, for example, Atamanov, Vladykin 1985; Vladykin 1994: 151–179; Chernykh 2002: 42–45; Anisimov 2017; Sadikov 2019: 193–236). At the same time, during the Soviet period, the use of magical beliefs and practices, especially in the context of funerals, remained largely an ideologically sensitive and semi-closed topic, which prevented their targeted and comprehensive study. As a result, the magical aspect of the funeral and memorial rituals of the Udmurts was mainly on the periphery of scientific interest, interpreted as an auxiliary or surplus element of the ritual, or considered outside the context of the holistic system of traditional beliefs and mythical-ritual ideas.

The focus of this study is on the magical aspect of Udmurt funeral and memorial rites since it is through magical actions that the symbolic interaction of humans with the otherworld is manifested, and the classificatory models of the world and social regulations of traditional society are expressed. Magic in this case is understood not only as a set of techniques or beliefs, but also as a special form of ritual communication that encompasses ideas about the structure of the universe, the purpose of human existence, and ways of maintaining cosmic order.

From a theoretical point of view, the study is based on the concept of ritual as a means of maintaining social and cosmic balance (Durkheim 2018; Malinowski 1948; Turner 1969), as well as on the ideas of symbolic anthropology (Lévi-Strauss 1963; Eliade 1957), which views magic as a specific language of traditional culture. The application of these approaches allows us to interpret the funeral and memorial practices of the Udmurts not only as a local ethnographic phenomenon, but as an element of a universal system of mytho-ritual belief, in which death and subsequent interaction with the souls of ancestors are a key means of maintaining cultural identity and sacred order.

The methodological basis of the study is a comprehensive approach combining comparative-historical and structural-semantic analysis of ritual tradition, as well as elements of symbolic and interpretative anthropology. The empirical basis consists of published ethnographic and folkloric materials from the 19th to 21st centuries, supplemented by the author's field notes from the early 21st century, mainly among the southern and eastern Udmurts. Ritual practices are considered holistic mytho-ritual complexes in which magical actions are ana-

lysed in the context of their ritual position, function and local interpretations by informants. The principles of contextual analysis and participant observation (where the fieldwork situation allowed) are used in the description and interpretation of the material.

General brief description of funeral and memorial rituals

To understand the context of Udmurt funeral and memorial rituals, this section provides a brief summary of the main elements of the ritual complex, its structure and main functions.

Udmurt funeral and memorial rites are traditionally divided into several interrelated stages: preparation for burial, the funeral ritual itself, and subsequent memorial services held on the 3rd, 7th, and 40th days after, and on the anniversary of, death. In the later period, with the spread of Orthodox Christianity, memorial services on the 9th day and six months after death were incorporated into the ritual complex, reflecting the process of confessional and cultural adaptation of traditional practices. Initially, memorial services among the Udmurt were usually held in the evening and at night, although in recent decades they have increasingly been moved to daytime hours, as informants say, “following the example of the Russians”, a change that is usually motivated by convenience for relatives and distant guests. In a number of villages, an archaic ritual of memorial sacrifice to deceased parents, *йыр-пыд сётон* (‘offering the head and feet [of a sacrificial animal]’), is still practiced, which is performed one year, three years or an odd number of years after a person’s death. The complex of rituals associated with the deceased is now fairly well described in the scientific literature and does not require detailed presentation in this work; it can be found in a number of special studies and summarising publications (see, for example, Holmberg 1914/1915; Ilyin 1926; Khristolyubova 1984: 83–101; Atamanov, Vladykin 1985; Materials... 1991; Vladykin 1994: 151–179; Chernykh 2002: 42– 45; Anisimov 2017; Sadikov 2019: 193–236).

Each stage of the funeral and memorial cycle was accompanied by actions with a pronounced magical orientation: from regulating the behaviour of participants and handling the body of the deceased to the use of special verbal formulas, objects and spatial restrictions.

In addition to private memorial services associated with a specific death, the Udmurt tradition also included special calendar periods of collective commemoration of ancestors, although these are not discussed in this article. The focus is on private memorial services and the funeral ritual itself. As researchers note, rituals involving the deceased among the Udmurts serve a dual function: on the one hand, they ensure the 'proper' transition of the soul to the world of the dead, and on the other, they are aimed at protecting the living from the possible harmful influence of the deceased and the otherworldly forces associated with them (Ilyin 1926; Vladykin 1994: 160; Khristolyubova 2003: 109–110). It is the fulfilment of these functions that determines the widespread use of various 'amulets', prohibitions, and magical prescriptions that structure the behaviour of ritual participants and set the limits of permissible contact with the body and 'soul' of the deceased. The fear of death among the living played a significant role in this. As Udmurt ethnographer Lyudmila Khristolyubova emphasises:

The fear of the dead and the realm of the dead in the cemetery gave rise to various cleansing customs and rituals: throwing away items that had come into contact with the deceased, washing floors, the elders patting the backs of funeral participants or stepping over a bonfire when leaving the cemetery, wiping hands with ashes at the gate upon returning from the cemetery, and washing in a bathhouse. The sleigh/cart was left at the gate on the street until rain or snow washed away the cemetery soil. Shovels were also cleansed of it. (Khristolyubova 2003: 110).

Harmful magic in funeral and memorial rituals

Harmful magic in Udmurt tradition is often associated with the use of elements of funeral and memorial rites to cause harm or induce illness or premature death. These beliefs are based on the popular view that the world of the dead is a source of dangerous, destructive power, which, with certain magical knowledge, can be accessed and directed against a specific person. In this context, elements of funerals and memorial services endowed with magical significance become a tool of aggressive influence, a kind of weapon in the hands of marginal actors. As the available materials show, magical practices, both folk healing and witchcraft, are particularly active at dusk and at night, when, according to

popular belief, contact with otherworldly forces is strengthened and “the sun does not see” (Nikitina 2003: 91–92; Panina 2014: 99; Anisimov 2017: 81–98).

Witches and sorcerers are widely considered to be active carriers of harmful magic. In the traditions of the central and northern Udmurts, one of their designations (*шай вылтэ ветлӱсь* ‘one who walks upon graves/visits the cemetery [for sorcery]’) directly indicates the connection of these characters with the cemetery space and their evil activities. At the same time, there is evidence that ordinary people who do not have the status of magical specialists can also engage in witchcraft out of resentment, envy, malice or hatred. It is believed that to carry out their intentions, they mainly use fresh graves or the burials of people who died prematurely or violently. According to popular belief, magical actions and the ‘power’ of the deceased’s soul can be used to harm the living.

One characteristic example was recorded in the village of Malaya Purga in the Malopurginsky District of Udmurtia, where an informant reported that a three-litre jar of vinegar and a photograph of an unknown young man were found on the grave of his murdered brother. According to relatives, this was an attempt to put a curse on the young man. The jar was removed, but a few days later, another jar with a photograph of the same man appeared on the same grave (FM, 2018: Minderovo village)². There are widespread beliefs that sorcerers or witches can bury a person’s personal belongings in a grave, causing them to fall ill, go mad or die. Therefore, during funerals, the behaviour of suspicious people or those considered sorcerers in the local community is monitored particularly closely to ensure that they do not place anything in the grave, and when visiting the cemetery, graves are carefully examined in search of possible ‘secret’ sorcerous burials.

Such materials demonstrate how elements of funeral and memorial practices are transformed into means of aggressive ‘dialogue’ with the world of the dead, when death and everything associated with it are used to harm others. Field materials show that belief in the existence of such practices and their practitioners persists today, and not only among the older generation.

A special place in the arsenal of harmful magic is occupied by the use of grave soil, usually taken from a recent burial or from the grave of a suicide victim (Anisimov 2016: 50). Witchcraft sees this as a means of destroying a person (partial harmful magic), since the attributes of death are thought to be carriers of dangerous destructive power. It is believed that enchanted soil is usually sprinkled at the threshold or in front of the gate so that a person pass-

ing by steps on it each time and thus gradually falls under the influence of the spell. Therefore, for protection, it is recommended to sweep the floor and the space in front of the threshold every morning when leaving the house, sweeping away all the bad things (Anisimov 2016: 50), or one should pray, addressing God with “*Осмэ!*” (‘Lord [protect me]!’) (FM, 2026: Bolshekachakovo v., Kaltasinsky District, Bashkortostan). According to other sources, grave soil is mixed into the food or drink of the person on whom the curse is to be cast. Situations associated with funerals and memorial services are considered particularly dangerous, as this is when sorcerers/witches are most active in such activities (Anisimov 2019: 252; Anisimov 2017: 130–133, 195–196, 207–208). For example, an informant from Alnashsky District in Udmurtia said that before her death, a witch confessed to her father that she had put a curse on him, placing a candle in his coffin, without specifying which candle she had used (FM, 2026: Izhevsk, Udmurtia).

Water left over after washing a corpse – *шöйө* (‘corpse water’) or *шайө* (‘graveyard water’) – is considered a powerful magical substance. Its special power is explained by its direct contact with the body of the deceased, i.e. with the realm of death; therefore, it is regarded as a potential means of causing harm to people and livestock. A sorcerer or witch who obtains such water, as with grave soil, can mix it into food, alcohol or other dishes, which, according to popular belief, causes sudden serious illnesses, insanity or other misfortune. When the eastern Udmurt suspect that an illness is related to the effects of such water, they say: *шöйө басьтэм* (literally, ‘corpse water took [him/her]’), directly linking the illness to the evil spell. Such water is perceived to be a dangerous element capable of transferring the destructive energy of the dead to living beings. Hence the belief that if a person steps on such a place, their legs will start to hurt (Sadikov 2019: 218). In this regard, corpse water is disposed of in a secluded place where ‘no human foot treads’ so that it does not fall into the hands of ill-wishers. For example, in Tatyshlinsky district in the Republic of Bashkortostan, it is poured into a ravine by a river with the words “*Вүдэ кисьтйськом, миським. Бердэ канчи кар*”, (‘We are pouring out [your wash-]water, we have washed [you]. Make [life] easy for those left behind [in this world]’ (Anisimov 2017: 195)); in the Yermeyekeyevsky district of Bashkortostan, water is poured into a ‘clean place’ in the garden, then the participants in the ritual outline it or draw a cross with a metal object, symbolically blocking access to evil people (Minniyakhmetova 1996: 175). Accord-

ing to popular belief, witches need only discreetly dip the hem of their shirt into such water, wring out the absorbed liquid, and then use it for witchcraft purposes, so they try to take the bucket of water outside and pour it out when no one sees. Therefore, sometimes corpse water is taken out of the house and poured out only after the coffin has been carried out, minimising the possible magical risk (Sadikov 2019: 204; FM, 2026: Bolshekachakovo v., Kaltasinsky District, Bashkortostan).

Corpse water is believed to have an effect on those who are directly involved in washing the deceased: people who wash the body begin to feel cold and their hands start to cramp. In connection with this, in some eastern Udmurt traditions, the deceased are traditionally washed in woollen gloves, which is believed to weaken the harmful influence of *uöüey* (FM, 2019: Urazgily v., Tatyshlinsky District, Bashkortostan). Today, when washing and preparing the body for burial is often carried out in mortuaries, such beliefs are largely preserved in the memory of older generations, although they continue to determine perceptions of the risks of contact with ‘substances of death’.

Magical significance is also attributed to special threads associated with funerals. Threads distributed to funeral attendees, or threads secretly removed from the pillow on which the deceased passed away, can become an important tool for harmful magic. According to popular belief, ill-wishers tie the victim’s hair into a tight knot with these threads, leading to a gradual loss of health and even sudden death (FM, 2015: Nikolashkino v., Bavlinsky District, Tatarstan). The northern Udmurt used threads placed under the armpit of the deceased during preparations for burial to cast a spell. These threads were then used to make an infusion, which was given to the person who had become the object of magical influence. It was believed that almost immediately after this, the victim would feel a sharp pain and weakness (FM, 2022: Kuregovo v., Glazovsky District, Udmurtia). Similar beliefs can still be found today in the stories of informants, including among young people, which testifies to the vitality of models of harmful magic based on funeral symbolism.

There are beliefs that sorcerers and witches also secretly obtain the clothing in which a person died, or at least a fragment of it, for use in their practices (FM, 2026: Bolshekachakovo v., Kaltasinsky District, Bashkortostan), attributing special magical powers to these items as carriers of the residual energy of the deceased and potential instruments of influence on the living.

According to informants, special attention should be paid during the *yū nuket* night vigil (literally ‘night sitting’, the ritual nocturnal wake over the deceased), as enemies who have come to supposedly say goodbye and support the family may use the situation for malicious actions: putting items belonging to a living person in the coffin, offering wine across the coffin, secretly taking something from the coffin, etc. Thus, according to Tatiana Vladykina, “if you want to kill someone, you need to find a piece of their clothing; you can tear off a piece of their dress/shirt and put it in the coffin with the dead person” (Vladykina 1992: 130). Another episode observed during the night vigil at my relative’s coffin is also telling: after midnight, some drunk women came to the house, sat down by the coffin and began to comfort the parents of the deceased. Then one of them passed a glass of wine to the father of the deceased across the coffin, insistently persuading him to drink, although he initially refused. When the woman’s husband asked for a glass for himself, she sharply objected, snatched it away and emphasised that the wine was intended specifically for her uncle, who eventually gave in to persuasion and drank it. Witnesses to the incident strongly condemned both the woman and the uncle, emphasising that passing any objects over the coffin is a strictly taboo and potentially dangerous practice (Anisimov 2017: 207).

Folk culture still has beliefs about the signs that indicate death caused by witchcraft. For example, the southern Udmurt believe that if during a funeral the candle at the head of the deceased burns with sparks and crackles, it means that death was caused by witchcraft: *касамын* (literally ‘spoiled’/‘bewitched’, referring to a death or illness directly induced by sorcery) (FM, 2015: Dubrovsky v., Kiyasovsky District, Udmurtia). In traditional communities, this usually serves as an explanation for a person’s premature death. If a person died from the magical influence of a witch or sorcerer, they say: *ведйнь сийиз* (literally ‘the sorcerer/witch devoured [him/her]’; that is, the sorcerer or witch consumed the person’s life force through witchcraft) or *ведйнь сиыса-юыса вииз/быдтүз* (literally, ‘the sorcerer/witch consumed [the victim’s life force]’), *ведйнь веднаса вииз/быдтүз* (literally, ‘the sorcerer/witch bewitched [the person] killed/destroyed’) (Anisimov 2017: 187), implying the ‘absorption’ of the life force. There is a widespread belief that if death occurred due to harmful magic, the sorcerer or witch ‘stands guard’ over the deceased until the burial, taking turns to control the outcome of the ritual or influence it in some other way. It is widely emphasised that, as noted earlier, special care must be taken

during funerals, as sorcerers can harm the living by placing a photograph, hair, nails or personal belongings of the person they plan to harm, as well as harm the deceased themselves, turning them into a member of the 'walking dead' who will return home and disturb the living.

The materials examined demonstrate that harmful magic in the context of the funeral and memorial complex is one of the important channels for communicating with the otherworld, when the resources of the 'world of death' are consciously transferred to the sphere of interpersonal conflict and social tension. Funeral attributes (grave soil, corpse water, threads, personal belongings of the deceased, etc.) function as conduits of destructive power, and the ritual situations themselves (funerals, memorial services, visits to the cemetery) are perceived as moments of particular vulnerability, conducive to aggressive magical actions. Sorcerers and witches, as well as the idea that 'ordinary' people can also practice sorcery, force people to be constantly on guard and carefully watch over the body of the deceased, the place of burial, and ritual food. This leads to the conclusion that harmful magic is perceived not as a minor exception, but as an important part of the worldview, which sets the boundaries of acceptable communication with the dead and influences the everyday behaviour of the living.

Protective magic in funeral and memorial rituals

Protective magic in the context of the topic under consideration is primarily aimed at preventing the negative influence of the dead, establishing and maintaining boundaries between worlds, and protecting the living. Various taboos and amulets serve as the main mechanisms designed to prevent the return of the deceased, their discontent or revenge, and thus preserve the fragile balance between the living and the dead. In anthropological theory, such practices are seen as forms of symbolic control over the dangerous liminal sphere: according to Mary Douglas, anything that goes beyond orderly classifications is perceived as a threat and requires regulation through taboos and purifying actions (Douglas 1966). A similar logic is demonstrated by Arnold van Gennep's theory of rites of passage, according to which death is an incomplete transition and is therefore accompanied by protective prohibitions and magical measures until the deceased is finally incorporated into the world of ancestors

(van Gennep 1960; Turner 1967). Vladimir Propp and Vladimir Toporov emphasise the need for strict adherence to normative forms of interaction with the dead, the violation of which is fraught with revenge or the return of the deceased (Propp 1986; Toporov 1995).

In popular belief, harmful properties were attributed to all objects that had come into contact with the deceased: the broom, the ladle used to pour water over them, the clothes they died in, and the tub in which they were washed (Khristolyubova 1984: 86). People tried to remove them from use as quickly as possible and throw them away in special places called *куркуян* ('a place where linden bark used in washing a deceased person was discarded'), which were also considered unclean and dangerous (ibid.), or they had to be buried together with the deceased in the grave. This was done in order to protect the living magically: potentially dangerous objects were isolated in a special 'death zone' to prevent the destructive force associated with the deceased from affecting the living. Today, such items are usually disposed of by burning, and the deceased's clothing is often distributed to the needy.

On the other hand, the clothes and personal belongings of a deceased relative may be endowed with special magical powers, which loved ones keep and use as apotropaic charms. For example, a piece of clothing belonging to a deceased family member may be kept in a car, believing in its protective power: *"авария но, мар но, медаз лу шуыса"* ('may no accident or any other misfortune happen') (FM, 2016: Urazgildy v., Tatyshlinsky District, Bashkortostan). In some cases, a piece of clothing in which a relative died is sewn into the lining of one's own clothing and worn, especially in crowded places, as protection against the evil eye, damage and the influence of sorcerers. Similarly, the deceased's cross, removed before burial, is carried as a means of protection against illness and theft. There have been cases where students took a piece of clothing belonging to a deceased relative to their exams, hoping for their support and a successful outcome. In modern Udmurt culture, these items are still preserved and used as amulets, in the belief that they connect the living with the dead, providing protection and assistance in difficult life circumstances.

In the traditions of the southern and eastern Udmurt, there is a rule that when going to fetch water to wash the deceased, "you must take a knife with you", which is considered a means of magical protection against evil spirits (FM, 2010: Dubrovsky v., Kiyasovsky District, Udmurtia). In the village of Novye Tatyshly, Tatyshlinsky District, Republic of Bashkortostan, it is noted that people went

to the spring with an axe and a shovel, allegedly to protect themselves from a possible encounter with a bear (*gondyr*) (FM, 2014: Izhevsk, Udmurtia). Such explanations probably reflect not only the fear of a real encounter with a bear, but also a deeper layer of belief in which the bear personifies the chthonic forces associated with the underworld and the world of the dead. As Tatiana Minniyakhmetova suggests, at a certain stage in the development of Udmurt mythology, the term *gondyr* could have referred to a specific creature of the water element or an impersonal creature dangerous to humans (Minniakhmetova 2003: 173). In Komi mythology, the image of a black bear is one of the zoomorphic forms of death (Tomilina 2014: 206). Hence, the place where a person might encounter a bear is likely to be located on the border between worlds, for example by a river.

The element of fire plays an important role in purification and protection from the consequences of contact with the world of the dead. The stove occupies a central place as a source of heat and the sacred centre of the home, embodying life and protection. Touching it or walking around it during funeral and memorial ceremonies is intended to restore vitality and ward off the cold of the afterlife. Thus, after the funeral and memorial service, people enter the house by stepping on ashes scattered in front of the porch or wiping their hands with ashes. Upon entering the house, it is customary to touch the stove with your palms, and in the Malopurginsky District of Udmurtia, it is even customary to walk around the stove (FM, 2010: Dubrovsky v., Staraya Salya v., Karamas-Pelga v., Kiyasovsky District, Udmurtia; FM, 2013: Puro-Mozhga v., Malopurginsky District, Udmurtia). As an analogue, in some Udmurt villages in Bashkortostan, salt is also used: for example, after visiting a cemetery, people rub their hands with it to cleanse themselves and not bring with them the unclean forces or influence of the world of the dead (FM, 2026: Bolshekhachakovo v., Kaltasinsky District, Bashkortostan).

To this day, there are still beliefs that some dead people are capable of visiting the living and causing them distress. Such 'walking dead' included those who had practiced magic during their lifetime, those who were particularly mourned by their relatives, people who had been cursed during their funeral, and the deceased who were dissatisfied with the attitude of the living or who wanted to take a family member with them. Folklore narratives note that after visits from the walking dead, people began to fall ill, weaken, lose their minds, or die. To prevent the deceased's return, relatives perform a series of apotropaic

actions during the funeral: carrying the coffin out through a window, removing the door from its hinges; an axe or knife is stuck into the threshold; a line is drawn with an iron object beyond the threshold and at the gate; juniper branches are placed above the doorposts or the house is fumigated with the smoke of this plant; an iron object (shovel, axe) is drawn around the grave so that “the dead do not return”. In the tradition of Orthodox Udmurt, the grave might be sprinkled with holy water, fumigated with incense or covered with earth consecrated during the funeral service, and a priest might be invited to perform the rite of consecration of the burial.

It is believed that when a deceased person leaves the grave, a hole resembling a mouse hole forms on the grave mound, through which his soul exits and visits living relatives. In the tradition of the eastern Udmurt, this phenomenon is called *buchyra*, which is perceived as an unwelcome visit from an uninvited ‘spirit guest’ whom people try to get rid of by resorting to various magical actions. If the *buchyra* appears in the form of a deceased husband or wife, a stake (usually made of aspen or rowan wood) or a nail without a head is driven into the hole, and the deceased is asked not to disturb the living anymore. In such situations, people can also seek help from magical specialists who perform special rituals to stop such visits (Anisimov 2023).

If, in the opinion of relatives, contact with the deceased continues after burial, special protective measures are taken: charmed poppy seeds or millet grains are sprinkled on the grave, an aspen or rowan stake, a rowan branch, or a nail without a head are driven into the grave; family members circle the house with an iron object, accompanying the action with the recitation of protective spells. In some eastern Udmurt villages, during the funeral, a needle without an eye is stuck into the coffin so that the deceased does not disturb the living and “does not go home” (FM, 2026: Bolshekachakovo v., Kaltasinsky District, Bashkortostan). Sometimes people turn to healers who perform complex rituals aimed at severing the connection between the living and the deceased who are disturbing them.

One of the specialised rituals designed to stop visits from a troublesome deceased person and prevent the death of a living person is *сьӧрлань / берлань куяськон* (literally ‘throwing back/behind oneself’, a protective ritual of casting away offerings over the shoulder to sever ties with a returning ghost). The ritual is performed in or outside the cemetery: standing with your back to the west or towards the cemetery, you throw pieces of food over your left shoulder

and loudly rebuke the deceased, demanding that they leave the living alone. In this way, a symbolic agreement is made with the deceased and they are appeased. In the Orthodox Udmurt tradition, in such cases it is customary to order a forty-day memorial service (*sorokoust*) and a funeral service for the disturbing deceased; a candle is lit for the repose of the soul and a note for the Proskomedia commemorating the deceased is submitted.

In the tradition of the eastern Udmurt, if a person is saved after a failed attempt at hanging, they should be beaten with the rope they used to try to take their own life in order to prevent further attempts and free them from the evil forces that are believed to be pushing them (FM, 2026: Bolshekachakovo v., Kaltasinsky District, Bashkortostan). The magical significance of the ritual lies in transforming the instrument of potential death into a means of protection and purification.

The funeral and memorial service involve close contact with the ‘realm of death’, which is why Udmurts still use various protective measures, especially before visiting the deceased. They might pour ashes into their socks, put garlic, onions, and a piece of bread in their pockets, and pin a pin to their clothes, saying: “*Веньлэсь, кортлэсь, пеньлэсь алама кужым кышка*” (‘Evil force fears the pin, iron, and ashes’) (Anisimov 2017: 215).

According to popular belief, pregnant women are particularly vulnerable during funerals and memorial services, so they are advised to avoid participating in such rituals altogether, let alone looking at or touching the deceased (Khris-tolyubova 1984: 61; Minniyakhmetova 2003: 22; Anisimov 2017: 115–117). Violation of these prescriptions can lead to serious consequences: miscarriage, stillbirth, a sick child, or the birth of a child who ‘has the appearance/visage of a corpse’ (*шӧй тусъем*), ‘corpse-faced’, ‘pale and lifeless’ (*шӧй бамъем*), pale, ‘like a dead person’ (Minniakhmetova 2003: 22; Sadikov 2008: 134; Anisimov 2017: 115–116). If a pregnant woman’s participation in a funeral is unavoidable, she must strictly observe protective measures: cover exposed parts of the body, pin a pin or needle to her clothes, sprinkle salt on her head, carry garlic or onions in her pockets, avoid direct eye contact with the deceased and physical contact with them (*ibid.*). Children were also protected from close contact with the world of the dead. This explains the prohibition on bringing children under the age of seven to the cemetery, as they are considered infants until that age, i.e. in a liminal, transitional state between worlds.

These practices indicate that protective magic functions as a kind of defensive strategy in the 'dialogue' between worlds, establishing a safe distance and regulating acceptable forms of contact with the dead. In contemporary society, the incorporation of elements of Orthodox culture has become increasingly evident, especially in regions inhabited by Orthodox Udmurt: holy water, icons, pectoral crosses, belts bearing the text of Psalm 90 ("He who dwells in the help of the Most High") or the prayer "Let God Arise", as well as the participation of priests in funeral and memorial rituals, are widely used. Thus, traditional magical beliefs are interwoven with Orthodox ritual practices, forming a hybrid system of protection against the dangerous aspects of the 'world of death'.

In general, protective magic appears as a system of everyday and ritual practices that regulate the boundary between the world of the living and the dead and minimise the potential harm from contact with the 'realm of death'. Beliefs about the 'walking dead' and the particular vulnerability of certain categories of the living (especially pregnant women and children) play an important role, reinforcing the need to observe prescriptions and use amulets. Taken together, these practices demonstrate that protective magic acts as a stable mechanism for maintaining symbolic order and control over the dangerous aspects of the funeral and memorial cycle, while today it is being actively reinterpreted and supplemented by Orthodox forms of protection.

Healing magic in funeral and memorial rituals

Healing magic in Udmurt funeral and memorial rituals is based on the belief that death has not only destructive but also transformative potential, and is capable of transferring illness from the realm of the living to the other world. Elements associated with death are endowed with ambivalent power: they are dangerous, but at the same time can be used for healing if one enters into strictly regulated ritual contact with them, which corresponds to Mary Douglas's understanding of dangerous and purifying substances (Douglas 1966). Such practices are based on the idea of transferring certain properties of the deceased (immobility, insensitivity, absence of pain) to a living person suffering from illness. Such a transfer can be interpreted in terms of James George Frazer's 'contagious magic', where qualities and states are transmitted through contact with objects (including those associated with the body and death) (Frazer 1911).

In this sense, funeral attributes acquire healing qualities and become mediators of dialogue with the otherworld, where illness is conceived as something that can be given to the dead or sent through them to another world, which is consistent with Arnold van Gennep's and Robert Hertz's interpretation of death as a multi-stage transition (Gennep 1960; Hertz 1960).

As part of partial healing magic, spells against illness are often performed directly in the cemetery, which in popular belief is considered a favourable place for the magical 'killing' of disease, its expulsion and separation from the patient's body. According to field materials, one common technique involves addressing a deceased person with the same name: to heal, it is necessary to find the grave of a person with the same name as the patient, take a handful of earth, wipe your hands with it and say the formula:

Тон но (кулэм муртлэн нимыз), мон но (улэн муртлэн нимыз). Кыскы, басьты висёнме. Кызъы тон висёнэз уд шӧдӱськы, мон но озъы ик медам ни шӧды ('Both you [name of the deceased] and I [name of the living]. Draw out, take away my illness. Just as you do not feel any illness, so may I too no longer feel [it]') (Anisimov 2017: 50).

In this ritual, the grave soil acts as a material medium of communication between the dead and the living, and the verbal formula fixes the desired transfer: the absence of pain in the deceased must be 'transferred' to the sick person.

The contrast between the therapeutic and harmful uses of the same attributes is striking: grave soil, which in witchcraft is used to 'destroy' a person, can serve as a means of relieving pain and illness in the context of healing magic. As mentioned above, this is consistent with Mary Douglas's description of the ambivalence of dangerous and simultaneously purifying substances associated with contamination and purity (Douglas 1966). This duality emphasises the ambivalent nature of elements associated with the world of the dead: they can be both dangerous and healing, and their effect depends primarily on the purpose of the ritual and the status and intentions of the person performing it, which echoes James George Frazer's idea of contagious magic (Frazer 1911) and Victor Turner's ambiguity of ritual symbols (Turner 1967; 1969).

Soap used to wash the deceased occupies a special place in healing magic. In the Udmurt tradition, it acquires the status of a powerful talisman and 'medicine' that embodies the pronounced qualities of death (peace, immobil-

ity, insensitivity) and can therefore be used to pacify brawlers, alleviate the suffering of the seriously ill, and as protection in critical situations. By using such soap, the afterlife is symbolically transferred to the living, and the effect of the object is based on ideas about the soul, traces of contact with the body of the deceased, and the ability of ritual objects to accumulate and transmit sacred power.

According to Grigory Vereshchagin, the rope used by a suicide victim to hang him- or herself could also serve as a talisman for healing, although he does not specify how this magical healing practice was carried out (Vereshchagin 2007: 24).

Belief in the power of deceased ancestors and their ability to help the living is particularly evident in practices for treating serious illnesses, when communication with the world of the dead requires strict observance of time, place, and ritual conditions. A characteristic example of this is the story of an informant from the village of Azamatovo in the Alnashsky District of Udmurtia that deals with the healing of asthma, which had to be carried out at exactly noon or midnight in the cemetery. According to the woman, the healers instructed her: "At midnight, go to the cemetery and find the grave with such-and-such a name. Take a chicken egg there and rub it on the grave. The egg must be fresh, just laid. Rub the grave while saying, 'Let all my illness go away!'" (Anisimov 2017: 83–84). According to the woman, her mother-in-law suffered from asthma, and, not daring to go herself at night, she sent her son instead. He found the right grave, rubbed the egg on the gravestone, and then broke the egg at home. According to the story, there were hair, wool and "other things" inside, all of which were burned in the oven, after which the illness disappeared. Several aspects are important in this example: the strict ritual time (noon/midnight), the need for a fresh egg, the coincidence of the names of the deceased and the sick person, and the final burning/destruction of the contents, which is interpreted as the materialisation of the 'removed' illness. Taken together, this demonstrates how belief in the power of deceased ancestors is combined with specific magical actions aimed at a visible result, i.e. the elimination of illness.

The examples given show that in the popular consciousness, healing magic does not simply 'soften' death, but transforms it into a resource for restoring life. Death here turns out to be not only the end point of existence, but also a

powerful symbolic resource which, when properly handled ritually, can restore a person's health, confirming the stability of the positive dialogue between worlds.

Conclusion

The analysis showed that magical practices play a central role in the funeral and memorial rites of the Udmurt and largely determine the logic of the entire ritual complex. Harmful, protective and healing magic form a unified system in which death is simultaneously a source of danger, a resource for protection and a potential means of healing. Through the use of funeral attributes (grave soil, corpse water, the deceased's clothing and belongings, ritual objects and substances), a complex dialogue is established between the worlds of the living and the dead, regulating the boundary between order and chaos, life and death.

The identification of three types of magical practice has made it possible to show their different but complementary functions. Harmful magic transfers the resources of the 'world of death' into the sphere of interpersonal conflict and social tension. Protective magic creates a regime of special caution and control in all situations related to the deceased and the cemetery, fixing a set of compulsory precautions and taboos. Healing magic, on the contrary, reinterprets death as a space where illness can be 'carried away', given to the deceased, 'killed' or sent to the cemetery/another world. In this context, funeral substances and objects appear fundamentally ambivalent: the same objects can cause harm or, conversely, protect and heal, it all depends on the purpose and performer of the ritual.

A special place in this complex is occupied by beliefs about the 'walking dead', sorcerers and witches, as well as the particular vulnerability of certain categories of the living, primarily pregnant women, children and the seriously ill. These beliefs maintain a state of constant vigilance and make everyday practices particularly vulnerable and significant in magical terms: from handling the deceased's clothing and storing amulets to rules of conduct in the cemetery and during memorial services. Thus, magic is not only a means of interacting with the otherworld, but also an important mechanism of social regulation that allows the community to control dangerous areas of contact with the 'foreign' space of death.

At the same time, the available material clearly demonstrates the plasticity of magical beliefs and their ability to adapt to a changing cultural and religious context. Traditional practices are increasingly intertwined with elements of Orthodox ritual: holy water, icons, pectoral crosses, belts with prayer texts, and the participation of priests in funerals and memorial services. The result is a complex syncretic matrix in which folk magic and Orthodox symbolism do not supplant each other, but complement and reinforce each other.

From a theoretical point of view, the material confirms the productivity of understanding magic as a special ritual language through which basic ideas about the structure of the world, the status of the living and the dead, and acceptable forms of communication between them are articulated. Magical actions in the Udmurt funeral and memorial cycle can be seen as a significant mechanism for maintaining symbolic order providing explanations for illness, death, and misfortune and offering practical models of response to these events.

Further comparative research seems promising, drawing on materials from other Finno-Ugric and neighbouring traditions, as well as analysis of contemporary transformations of magical practices in the context of urbanisation, migration, media influence, and secularisation. This will make it possible to trace which elements of the magical complex remain stable, which are subject to reinterpretation or marginalisation, and how the balance between harmful, protective and healing magic is changing in contemporary communities within the framework of funeral and memorial rites.

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Notes

¹ The Udmurts are one of the indigenous Finno-Ugric peoples of central Russia, belonging to the Permian branch of the Uralic language family. According to the 2021 All-Russian Population Census, their population is about 385,000. Most live in the

Udmurt Republic, as well as in the neighbouring regions of Bashkortostan, Tatarstan, Perm Krai, and Kirov Oblast. There are significant diasporas in other CIS countries, and in Kazakhstan and Estonia.

² In accordance with confidentiality principles, the personal data of informants is not disclosed here or below. This ensures their anonymity, and compliance with ethical standards for handling personal information.

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