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The Role of Calendar Rituals as Regulators

Abstract. Every community has ideas of what is important and meaningful for its members. In a 'traditional' culture, one sees purpose and meaning in rituals, and everyday existence is interspersed with them. In particular, calendar rituals regulate the annual cycle and family customs relate to the cycle of life. This paper examines Udmurt calendar rituals regulated by various means and rules, attempting to explain which of the regulators played a significant role and which favoured the preservation and development of traditional customs. These regulators include the lunar and solar calendars, environmental conditions, society itself and its expectations, and religious life.

Keywords: calendar rituals, regulators, Udmurts, taboos and prohibitions, temporal and spatial limits

Introduction

Traditional customs play a special role in the culture of any community, acting as a mechanism for the preservation and transmission of cultural values, meanings, symbolism, and the very identity of a given society. Such traditions are inherent in most social and cultural systems, where they accumulate, transmit, and transform accumulated social experience. It is also well known that,

*folklore tradition is the transmission through oral communication of the culturally and socially significant messages and the only way to preserve, transmit, and reproduce information is through its periodic reproduction.*¹

¹ S. Yu. Neklyudov, 'Kulturnaya pamyat' v ustnoy tradicii: istoricheskaya glubina i tehnologiya peredachi' ['Cultural Memory: Historical Depth and the Mechanics of Transmission in the Oral Tradition'], *Navstrechu Tret'emu Vserossiyskomu kongressu folkloristov. Sbornik nauchnyh statey* (Moskva: Gosudarstvenny respublikanskiy centr russkogo folklor, 2013), pp. 9–15 (p. 9), <https://www.ruthenia.ru/folklore/necklyudov78.htm>.

Naturally, every group has ideas about which of these messages must be reproduced, which ones are most important and meaningful for its members and which can be disregarded or hidden. In traditional cultures, these choices, closely related to the purpose and meaning of life itself, are intermingled with, punctuated, and shaped by ritual. In some ways, daily life can be seen simply as a preparatory period for the next rite, the practice itself being the key point of reference for the cycle, a time to prepare for the next phase of everyday life and to shape a desired future. Ritualisation thus seems to be inherent in humans:

*Our lives are a collection of rituals. The way we wake up, the way we leave or enter our home, the way we prepare our suitcase before going on a trip are simple examples of the many rituals each of us have constructed and they structure our everyday lives.*²

Calendar rituals regulate the annual cycle and family customs control everyday social life. But why not the other way around? How and in what way is a ritual itself regulated? In this essay, based on forty years of fieldwork with the Udmurt community,³ I consider their calendar rites and look at how these rituals have been regulated historically and are today.⁴ I will explore which of the regulators played a significant role and favoured the preservation and development of traditional customs.

Modern Udmurt society is no longer traditional, but here I will focus on those who try to keep, preserve, and develop their pagan beliefs while living in a rapidly changing world. These circumstances make

² Pierre Lévy, 'Exploring the challenge of designing rituals', IASDR Interplay 2015 Congress, 2–5 November 2015, p. 1, <https://www.academia.edu/search?utf8=%E2%9C%93&q=exploring+the+challenge+of+designing+rituals> [accessed 13 May 2020].

³ I have been working in the Udmurt community since the 1980s, visiting many times, both on my own and with Russian colleagues. I have spoken with people of every age, though the active pagan priests and the elderly from rural areas had particularly extensive stories and narratives. In the last decade, I have also been collecting material from the internet and from contributors who have moved to urban centres from the villages.

⁴ Tatiana Minniyakhmetova, *Kalendarnye obryady zakamskih udmurtov* [Calendar Rites of the Trans-Kama Udmurts] (Izhevsk: UdIYaL UrO RAN, 2000); Tatiana Minniyakhmetova, *Tradicionnye obryady zakamskih udmurtov: Struktura. Semantika. Folklor* [Traditional Rituals of Trans-Kama Udmurts: Structure, Semantics, Folklore] (Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli kirjastus, 2003); T. G. Vladykina and G. A. Glukhova, *Argod-bergan: obryady i prazdniki udmurtskogo kalendarya* [The Turning of the Year: Rituals and Feasts of the Udmurt Calendar] (Izhevsk: Udmurtskiy universitet, 2011).

it necessary to find new ways and means, a phenomenon that can be seen in changes in ritual culture and practice. But there is something in us that wants to hold on ritual, to hold and protect it and let its function, meaning, and development continue into the present.

'Ritual not only takes place within a social process but is itself processual.'⁵ According to Turner, this extends to society itself: 'Society (societas) seems to be a process rather than a thing — a dialectical process with successive phases of structure and communitas.'⁶ Nevertheless, some features are preserved and constant, even if, outwardly, they may seem to radically transform through these processes. Among these are concepts of space and time, always there at an unconscious level, and nothing happens without them.⁷ Taking this as a given, let us look for other key phenomena necessary for the functioning of any ritual.

Taboos and Prohibitions

People are more focused on taboos than on what is allowed. We generally pay more attention to prohibitions, what not to do, than adhere to positive rules aimed at guiding our behaviour. 'Prohibitions are thus a particular type of regulator, ones which are essential, above the rules, and play an important role in maintaining the cohesion and identity of the confessional group.'⁸

⁵ Matheu Deflem, 'Ritual, Anti-Structure, and Religion: A Discussion of Victor Turner's Processual Symbolic Analysis', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 30.1 (1991), 1–25 (p. 22).

⁶ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Antistructure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 203.

⁷ Tatiana Minniyakhmetova, 'Ciklichnost vremeni i prostranstva v traditsionnykh predstavleniyah zakamskih udmurtov' ['Cyclicity of Time and Space in the Traditional Worldview of Trans-Kama Udmurts'], *Vzaimodeystvie kultur narodov Urala* (Ufa: Gilem 1999), pp. 101–08; Tatiana Minniyakhmetova, 'Prostranstvo i vremya: predstavleniya o ciklichnosti' ['Space and Time: Ideas on Cyclicity'], *Finno-ugrovedenie*, 1 (2009), 39–45; Tatiana Minniyakhmetova, 'On Structuring of Spaces and Boundaries', in *The Inner and the Outer: The Ritual Year 6*, Yearbook of the SIEF Working Group on the Ritual Year, ed. Mare Kõiva (Tartu, 2011), pp. 141–50; Tatiana Minniyakhmetova, 'O nekotorykh osobennostyakh orientazii vo vremeni i prostranstve' ['About Some Features of Orientation in Time and Space'], *Ezhegodnik finno-ugorskih issledovaniy*, 10.3 (2016), 56–61; Tatiana Minniyakhmetova, 'Symbolical Boundaries. Spatial Intimacy or Spatial Contradiction?', in *Rajaamatta. Etnologisia keskusteluja*, ed. Hanneleena Hieta et al., Ethnos-toimite 20 & Scripta Aboensis 4 (Helsinki: Ethnos & Turku: Turun yliopisto, kansatiede, 2017), pp. 276–93.

⁸ E. B. Smilyanskaya, 'Rol' zapreta v sohranении identichnosti konfessionalnoy gruppy' ['The Role of Prohibitions in Preserving the Identity of a Confessional Group'], Pre-

Hence, prohibitions contribute to and favour the functioning of community. As an integral part of many mythological beliefs and rites, they play an important role in the moral and everyday life of the people, contribute to the harmony of community relations, and connect the 'nature – human – society' continuum together. As Svetlana Tolstaya asserts, 'the material of folklore, beliefs, ritual regulations, and prohibitions make it possible to reconstruct one of the most important semantic categories of culture – the value of traditional society'.⁹ Prohibitions (restrictions) and permissions (rights) are thus key mechanisms in the quest for spiritual and moral perfection, and thus intimately shape our ceremonial actions, and society itself.

People are primarily afraid to violate, convinced that punishment will follow. During a ritual – preparation, performance, and completion – it is often observed that people remark about how you should or should *not* behave. Less often, someone teaches you how to do something, how to act exactly correctly. These rules are mastered in a more inconspicuous way, by observing family members and strangers, following their behaviour, and imitating them, rather than by explicit instruction or injunction.

There are many prohibitions and restrictions, each of which has its own meaning and significance. It may seem that society itself is the main and perhaps the only regulator of ritual, but in the case of calendar practices, the calendar itself dictates and guides how and when they are enacted. Calendar rites are thus precisely and definitively related to these temporal limitations and parameters. In the case of Udmurts, the main rules around household and economic activity are defined by the solar and lunar calendars. Many rituals depend on regional weather, climatic and environmental conditions, or are vulnerable to unforeseen circumstances, however, and so the ritual cannot be organised in a completely predictable way. In some years, for example, winter prayer ceremonies and worship cannot be organised in a wood or meadow, far from a village sacred place because of large amounts of snow; spring-summer rituals may be difficult to perform in a particular sacred place due to incessant rain and floods. Thus, even sim-

sentation at the Spring School 'Historical Memory in Folklore', Centre for Typology and Semiotics of Folklore of the Russian State University for Humanities, 2007.

⁹ S. M. Tolstaya, *Obraz mira v tekste i rituale* [*The Image of the World in Text and Ritual*] (Moskva: Russkiy fond sođeystviiya obrazovaniu i nauke, 2015), p. 80.

ple seasonal climatic variations force people to adapt their practices and to regulate and manage the situation in their own way. Adaptation may also be demanded by private, or personal circumstances. For instance, it is sometimes impossible to perform a ritual as it should be performed due to the death of a family member or a relative, or perhaps an accident such as a fire in the village.

Highlighting taboos and prohibitions in a designated time and space affirms the values important to a society in a vivid and expressive way. That itself is a kind of testimony to the power of the social order, one that is not only inherent in ritual time and space, but that is an integral part of people's daily lives.

The Solar Calendar

For the Udmurts, the main calendars are solar and lunar; the first more fixed than the latter.¹⁰ The winter and the summer solstices, for example, occur annually in the same period. These dates are very fundamental to the Udmurt ritual calendar, hence significant rites occur on these dates. The lunar calendar begins by referring to the solar calendar: that is, ritual dates are calculated only after the winter solstice, starting with the first new moon after the new year that begins according to the Julian calendar. The periods between the main rituals of the year are calculated in blocks of seven weeks. Seven weeks after the first new moon of the new year comes Pancake week/Shrovetide; seven weeks later comes the Great Day (Easter), and so on. These events and their timings are well defined in tradition and cannot be changed; it is necessary to observe and adhere to them. Thus, the calendar itself is one of the main regulators of rituals associated with the passing of time and of the year.

The Lunar Calendar

In the lunar calendar, the phases of the moon are central: new, full, and the first and last quarters. Certain rituals and ceremonies are required, or forbidden, according to these phases, and shorter periods of time are also considered, as in the case of certain days in a week, when it is either possible, or forbidden, to perform appropriate ritual actions and worship gods and spirits. Other prohibitions and rules that

¹⁰ Minniyakhmetova, *Kalendarnye obryady zakamskih udmurtov*, pp. 7–10.

are directly related to, and dependent upon, the time of day, in connection with the movement of the sun, need to be considered, as well. For example, all ritual activities must begin in the morning or before noon, before the sun has declined to the west. In addition, activities should be conducted on a 'good' day of the week, like Monday, Friday, or Sunday, and should be done observing the phases of the moon. All these rules and prohibitions are followed when performing ceremonies, whether addressed to the gods and spirits, or to the living and the world around us.

Dealing with the Dead

When rites are performed in honour of deceased ancestors and their souls and spirits, things are reversed. The ceremonies in honour of the departed begin after noon, in the evening, and even at night, but must be completed before sunrise. All movements in space are made counter-clockwise: the participants take places at the table 'moving against the direction of the sun', this means counter-clockwise, and must leave the table in the same way. When the table is set, all the treats are placed counter-clockwise, and all the treats for the participants are also served counter-clockwise. In addition, the distribution of the space in the house between the living and the dead is strictly observed: places for the dead are at the mouth of the stove and closer to the entrance door or to the north, and places for the living are far away from the dead.

All rituals must follow certain rules, but these can sometimes be defined by *prohibitions*, that is, when and what things must not be done, and why certain deeds and actions cannot be performed. Within these larger rituals, we must also consider 'the little things', such as the appropriate time to wash ritual clothing and objects, clean ritual dishes, or purify participants, in the ceremony before the event. This also includes the observance of rules and prohibitions in the preparation of ritual dishes at home even before departure to the sacred place. The place and time of putting on ritual clothes also matters.

Spatial Limits

Having considered the concept of prohibitions and rules within the temporal frame, it is necessary to look at prohibitions and rules in spatial terms. It is significant that the place itself was chosen and prepared

by ancestors long ago and there is thus no need to reconsider. All of my contributors agree: the place is permanent and has been so since ancient times. But we need to take into account what is happening there now, what is prohibited, what is allowed, and what must be respected and observed. Orientation in space is omnipresent and essential: which way to turn, how to stand, what position to hold when preparing the ritual place for the rite, cleaning the house and rooms before the ritual, preparing clothes, food, cleansing oneself. As a rule, the family sits at the table before going to a ceremony; they get up from the table 'moving in the direction of the sun', i.e., clockwise, and then leave the house. It is of great importance not to break the rules when taking a first step, for example, one must step on the right foot and at least a little in direction to the south, one must not turn one's back on the ritual table, and must not touch the table with sexual organs. Having entered a sacred place, i.e., in the praying place or ritual place, everyone should know their own place and their own roles, as described below.

Traditionally, the society consisted of kinship groups which had and still have their own subdivisions that are strictly observed during the ritual period and at the ritual itself. If there is a family or a kindred



Fig. 1. A delimited space for prayer, 2000.

Photo by Tatiana Minniyakhmetova

group at home, they are in their own space. There are, however, many kindred unions gathering at public ceremonial events. To keep and preserve the order, the sacred space has subdivisions between the kindred groups. This sacred space is divided by gender: women occupy the left side, men occupy the right side, which means the female half falls to the eastern side of the space, and the male half falls to the west side. The most sacred part of the space is the southern, where the human foot does not enter; close to that is the place of the 'priests' *vös'as'* (priest of the indigenous Udmurt religion), the place of bonfires, and cooking and preparing the ritual food. This is the general structure of each sacred space. The combination of all these rules and the structural order themselves regulate people's behaviour and the integrity of the event. This procedure and the prohibitions rule people in a natural way; adults and small children gather from different streets and houses or even from various villages, and all seems to be chaotic. However, when they cross the border into the sacred space, everything falls into place. The order is established that has evolved over the centuries. After this, no movements are made and people stay in their places. Before prayer and worship begin, the participants take their places behind the priests, then the movement of people also occurs in some imperceptible way and everyone finds themselves in their places: priests, men, women, children. This is one of the important conditions for the performance of the ceremony, which is performed without fail and 'by itself'.

Society and Participants

The ritual ceremony is not performed by itself without the participation of people, of course, and there are designated ritual actors, particular individuals who are directly responsible for organising the ceremony, its preparation, conduct, and completion.

Each Udmurtian community has its own *vös'as'* ('priest') and assistants. Their number depends on the number of kindred groups in a particular community. According to the calendar, those priests and their assistants at first discuss details of the upcoming ritual among themselves and then spread information about it to the community members. Afterwards, in each family, preparations for the ceremonies begin. The priests and assistants communicate how many and what kind of sacrifices will be necessary for the gods and spirits, who will be able to donate what kind of sacrifice, and from whom the sacrifice can

be purchased (a domestic animal and poultry). Priests or their families also clean and prepare ritual towels and dishes. Having bought animals and poultry for sacrifice early in the morning of the day of the ceremony, the priests and assistants go to the sacred ritual place. They bring all necessary things: sacrifices, dishes, towels, or even firewood.

When the organisers of the ceremony first arrive at the place, a fire is lit. It is no wonder that there is a conviction that 'during prayer ceremonies a hearth or a fireplace is considered as the centre of the ritual space'.¹¹ It is not by chance that in such situations the prayers are assisted by a person called the *tylas'*, who is assigned in advance and is responsible for setting, guarding, and finally extinguishing the fire before, during, and after the ceremony.

Each of the priests is responsible for a specific sacrifice, and every assistant has their own duties, such as bringing water, washing dishes at the sacred place, stabbing the sacrifice and preparing the meat for boiling, boiling meat, and cooking porridge. After all these preparations are done, they pray, distribute food, and complete the rite.

At the very end of the ritual, the *vös'as'* and his assistants rake the ashes together to the centre of the fireplace *tylzhu*, that is, walking clockwise three times around the fireplace; 'in this way the opened ritual space was again reduced to the single original point'.¹² Accordingly, the ritual is completed in terms of both time and space. Afterwards, the organisers of the ritual leave to go to their homes.

Conclusion

The material living conditions of many communities are often very poor and without symbolic beliefs, practices, and values, community life would simply be impossible. Usually a ritual is a standardised set of actions of symbolic content performed in a situation prescribed by tradition. The words and actions that make up the ritual are determined precisely and do not change significantly. Traditions also determine who can perform the rituals. After the ceremony, participants usual-

¹¹ Ranus Sadikov, *Tradicionnye religioznye verovaniya i obryadnost zakamskih udmurtov (istoriya i sovremennye tendencii razvitiya)* [Traditional Religious Beliefs and Rituals of Trans-Kama Udmurts (History and Modern Development Trends)] (Ufa: Centr etnologicheskikh issledovaniy Ufimskogo nauchnogo centra RAN, 2008), p. 112.

¹² Minniyakhmetova, 'Ciklichnost vremeni i prostranstva v traditsionnykh predstavleniyah zakamskih udmurtov', p. 107.

ly experience great emotional agitation and release. For the Udmurts, however, it is more than that. In my opinion, most of them experience a sense of responsibility, duty, and involvement in religious activities, but the act of *taking part* seems more important than the representationalism and formality of the ceremonies themselves. Perhaps it is not true, in the case of the Udmurts, that ritual is still interpreted in large measure of only in relation to beliefs.

The examples described show that the regulators of the ritual are not only the people themselves, but that the people themselves are in submission to phenomena that are not dependent on them like time (i.e., the calendar) and space (i.e., the sacred ritual place or each place for conducting a ritual ceremony), and the people are forced to adapt to them. Based on this situation, the accomplishment of ritual actions and its performance is generated by the society which is affected on some levels and preserving differences of age, sex, religious or social hierarchy, etc. The ritual, in turn, exercises the aims, expectations, standards, norms, and consolidates the members, strengthening their identity and solidarity. A deeper appreciation of rituals would enable participants to respond more consciously to traditional formats as well as to deal with the challenges of meaningful and rational participation when rituals lose their original meaning.

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