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## Mari Ritual Practices as Representation

**Abstract.** This article focuses on festivals and rituals of the Mari people living in the economically depressed Volga region of Russia. The article focuses on women's activity during the Mari festivals and the ways in which this activity can be framed as a representation of the official power. The festivals organized by the local administration are compared to the rituals coordinated by the local people, mostly by the women. Based on field work done in 2002–2004, the purpose of the author is to find an answer to the following question: does the feast, the stage provided by the bustle of a festival, construct the strength of national identity, or do festivals just provide the binding force to the recurring rhythms of everyday life?

**Keywords:** clothing, festival, identity, Mari, Post-Soviet time, private life, ritual, women's activity.

### Introduction

In my paper, I am focus on three Mari village festivals and analyse two Mari practices, focusing at a festival as the representation of the official power, as well as the result of the activity of local people, who are mostly women.

The Mari people live in the Volga region in Russia in the Mari El Republic. Geographically, the Mari are divided into three groups. There are Mari living in the hilly south bank of the Volga, as well as in the meadow areas on the north bank. The third group consists of those Mari who moved to the Ufa district in the 16th century. Despite the influence exerted by the Orthodox Church, old religious beliefs and practices have been observed by the Mari from the 16th century up to the present. The Republic of Mari El was the part of the former Soviet Union, and now belongs to the Russian Federation. The majority of the Mari still live in the countryside.

The Mari agricultural rites were mostly calendrical, repeated regularly at given times of the year and involving the whole community.

The plough feast, the Midsummer Night and summer feasts were organised by priests. The Mari adopted elements of the church calendar and Soviet celebration days, as well.

In the Post-Soviet era, the Mari people revived the ritual year remembering the past. The agrarian cycle was reviewed, and it enhanced new feasts with traditional character, such as festivals involving traditional foods and dresses. The culture is not static; it is changing constantly, just as the ritual year and feasts are changing, and yet maintaining a continuity of practice.

In Finland, Anna-Leena Siikala studied the process and the meaning of Udmurt sacrificial rituals and how these rituals shifted from local and regional festivals to national festivals (Siikala & Ulyashev 2011). Paul Fryer (2001) and Ulrike Kahrs (2005) considered the Mari feasts in the Post-Soviet time, at the beginning of the 2000s, from the point of view of how people search for identity as an expression of an ethnic group or as part of a multicultural society. Sonja Christine Luehrmann (2011) studied the religious life and its transformation in the Mari Republic during different historical periods.

I began my fieldwork among the Mari people in Russia in 1981. Over several years, I spent approximately one month in the field on a yearly basis, mostly in the summer. Summer is the time for feasts, both official feasts and traditional ones. I studied Mari folk clothing, its traditional forms, and the re-invented and renewed forms, as well as aspects of everyday life, including feasts and festivals as a part of the Mari cultural heritage. I observed the Festival of Flowers in the following Mari villages: Bash-Shidy on June 20, 1991, Byrgynda on June 18, 1995, Tymbaevo on June 19, 1997, Morki on June 15, 2002, Uncho on June 16, 2002, and in Yoshkar-Ola, the capital of the Republic of Mari El, on June 20, 1993. I also took part in the traditional performances organized by the communities.

I focused on the feasts as a part of private life, particularly with regards to women's roles and participation. Traditionally, the home was the focus of women's activity. The women hold key positions as organisers of village events. According to Marjorie Balzer and Anna-Leena Siikala, the maintenance of traditions of beliefs and organisation of village feasts were the domain of women even before the 1917

Revolution (Balzer 1999: 121—123; Siikala & Ulyashev 2011: 65—67).

I observed, and present here, three festivity cases and two models from the point of view of women's participation and activities.

### **Model 1. Flower Feast as a representation of the official power**

The Mari national festival is the Flower Feast, the “Peledesh pairem,” which is held in the middle of June. The festival was founded in 1920 in the city of Malmyzh replacing the sacrificial feasts for ancestors, the Semyk (Peledysh pairem 1928; Yoshkar Peledysh pairem 1930). According to Karen Petrone, this replacement of one festival by another was about the confrontation of religious tradition and practice with the new, secular, Soviet regime. The Soviet officials discredited the religion and replaced religious holidays with Soviet holidays (Petrone 2000: 10).

Sonja Luehrmann (2011), who studied the religious life in the Mari El Republic, notes that in the 1920s an important annual celebration of *kolkhoz*<sup>1</sup> farmers was organized in a new form, in which religious elements were deliberately played down. Firstly, it was named “Yoshkar peledesh pairem,” where the red (yoshkar) became the symbol of revolution. The public face of the Soviet Union changed profoundly during the 1930s; celebrations introduced new Soviet policies to the public. Stalin promoted a patriotic Soviet rhetoric. In the 1930s and 1940s, the official discussion of ethnic celebrations highlighted the importance of such gatherings as opportunities for transforming proletarian performances to Soviet-type festivals (Pechnikova 2010; Kalinina 2013: 278—279). In 1930, the Mari Flower Festival ceased to be a national festival. It was revived in 1965 as a festival of country people, of *kolkhozes*. Following this history, provides an opportunity for creating a model of the development of festivals that reveal their full dependence on the ideology of the ruling state and official powers that be.

**Case 1. The Flower Festival in the village of Uncho on June 16, 2002.** The Flower Festival in Uncho was held in the central field of the village, where a spring is located that is used by all the commu-

nity. The village committee cleaned the field at the eve of the festival. The main organizer of the festival was the cooperative, the collective farm, formerly identified as *kolkhoz*. The festival began very gently. The moderator August Romanov arrived from Yoshkar-Ola, the capital of the Mari Republic, and set the atmosphere by telling jokes. The program contained Mari pop songs incorporating elements of contemporary folk music. The public followed, and participated in, the songs and dances of the performers. After the program, the feast organized by the schoolteachers and the director of the culture house began. The children presented folk dances and songs. Games and sports events were held in the field. Families sat side by side in a great picnic. Women offered different types of pies, bread, and homemade mead (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. A family picnic during the Flower Festival in Uncho, 2002.  
Photo: Ildikó Lehtinen

The festival included a show of folk dresses. The schoolchildren were dressed in national costumes; the teachers and young housewives wore dresses decorated with Mari embroidery. Some older women wore the traditional Mari dress. The Mari singer Shakirov wore a shirt embroidered with Mari motifs, but his young singer, Mizhana, had a contemporary, fashionable, glitter top and changed her top twice during the performance.

The most important feature of the feast appeared to be the opportunity for families to come together. Informants described it as the feast for families, mentioned the food, and the opportunity to be together. Families invited relatives from the cities, and the feast connected kin who might not see each other on a regular basis.

The official, the collective, part of the feast was very calm. The organizer, members of the cooperative, gave the financial support that provided for the Mari performance. The songs in Mari language, the Mari dresses, and the food, emphasized the Mari character of the feast, and highlighted a sense of Mari nationalism. The food reflected the traditional rural practices, and simultaneously made an accent on the role of women as the motor of national activities. The women prepared the food, and the women embroidered the dresses for their families. While the celebration preparation and practices were family centered, and in that way private, the feast was held in a collective field. This juxtaposition of elements extended to the day on which the festival was held, a Friday, which was the Mari traditional holy day in the Mari “pagan” religion.

### **Case 2. Flower Festival in the village of Morki on June 15, 2002.**

The Flower Festival in the city of Morki was held on a Saturday, June 15, 2002. The festival took place in a field on the outskirts of the city. People came from different directions, walking or driving through fields, bushes, and forests to arrive at the festival site. Along the road, there were tables with Mari national foods, some small exhibition of Mari handicrafts, and small shops stands offering international foods, *shashliks*,<sup>2</sup> Russian pies, cakes, Colas, sweets, and chocolates. In the middle of the field, there was a platform. Along the borders of the field were located a wrestling place, swings, and sports ground.

The program began with the folk dance of the folklore group from Bashkortostan. After the dance, the head of the administration gave greetings in Mari language, but the main speech was in Russian. He gave medals for the prospering work to Ruslan, the head of a working construction team, and to Alekseyeva, the dairymaid. After that, the flags of the Russian Federation and the Mari El Republic were hoisted. Following this opening introduction the official speeches came. Speakers included the head of the local administration, the representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture, war veterans, city administrators, and the special invited guests, including the heads of the delegations of Bashkortostan and Chuvashia. During the speeches, the delegates gave gifts to the best workers as rewards for their work. Gifts included cutlery and china, coffee-machines, and televisions. All 15 winners were men.

The program continued with national dances of the folk group from Bashkortostan, and Chuvashian and Mari songs. The folk group and the singers wore standardized performance dresses. It rained, but the audience did not move and stayed intently focused on the performers and performances.

After the official program, the sports games began. Eating began and continued. The shashliks, Russian pies, and Pepsi-Cola were very popular. The men drank beer and, probably, vodka.

The organizer of the feast was the city of Morki's administration. This model of organization was similar to that of Soviet times. Karen Petrone emphasized that the Soviet holiday culture was a syncretic mixture of traditional and Soviet holiday practices. The Soviet holiday culture included three types of Russian parades that lent meaning to the Soviet demonstration: political demonstrations, military drills, and religious processions (Petrone 2000: 25). The Morki festival, organized by a branch of the government, also contained speeches with political references and reflected an international character.

The celebration followed the model of Soviet behavior and emphasized the Russian / Soviet identity, a patriotic allegiance to the motherland. The guests from Bashkortostan and Chuvashia supported the idea of the diversity of nations in the Russian Federation. The program was rigidly organized, thus showing the power of the

administration. The performance costumes appeared to be “modified” national costumes, approved by officials. The festival was the performance of collective life without any feature from the spontaneous Mari culture. The Flower Festival represented a chance to eat and drink rather than celebrate the Mari El Republic and the Mari identity. The invited guests were reminiscent of former Soviet propaganda and agendas, as a theme that wound through all of the activities was that of “friendship between peoples.”

**Model 2. Festivity as a result of the activity of local people:  
The day of commemoration of ancestors**

Lauri Honko, the Finnish researcher, said that three multifunctional categories of supernormal beings can be distinguished in Finno-Ugrian belief systems: the dead, spirits, and saints. The power of the ancestors over the means of subsistence, as well as the health and well-being of the family, has been recognized since ancient times (Honko 1993: 567). To this day, the Mari have a series of commemorative rituals (“kon parem”). The most important collective feasts are Easter and the Semyk, which is held on the Thursday before the Orthodox Whit Sunday, in late May through June, depending on the date of Easter. The Semyk is a typical feast of private life. Even though the (male) Mari priest heads the feast, and is the one who prays to the ancestors to give well-being and health to the family, the feast is based on the activity of women.

In the village of Uncho, I took part in this feast on two occasions, in 2002 and 2004. The first feast was supported by the cooperative. That support and organization meant that the head of the cooperative gave some products, such as honey, meat, sugar, rice, and biscuits, for the common meal. The timing of the feast coincided with the time of the local radio to switch in the early morning. The radio announcer broadcast the opening of the feast and invited people to take part in it.

The feast included a meal for the ancestors. The Mari priest set fire to kindle and prayed for the family well-being and blessings from the deceased. The priest and the members of the family took the meal and put it in the garden near to the gate. The gate is representative of the border between life and the afterlife (Fig. 2).





*Fig. 2. The priest and the members of the family put the meal for the ancestors in the garden near to the gate, which represents the border between life and afterlife.*

*Photo: Ildikó Lehtinen*



*Fig. 3. The meal for the ancestors includes some chicken meat, a piece of pancake, some sweets and fruites. Photo: Ildikó Lehtinen*



All the members of the family spent the feast this way as a private celebration. In the evening, after women's works was done, some women with children went to the village border, where birch trees grew. This place serves as a symbol of the sacrificial site. The women put bread, milk products, and drink around the tree. Many of the women wore local dress; the young and the children were dressed in modern fashion. The priest prayed with a candle and blessed the meal and the drink. The sun was shining, and some men made a mid-summer pyre. All people jumped over the bonfire for health and happiness. Spontaneously, participants started singing Mari songs and dancing during the night.

**Case 3. Ancestor's Feast on May 26—27, 2004.** During the Ancestor's Day, we did field research and got interviews with different families. All the families we interviewed prepared food for their ancestors. The priest blessed the food with a candle (Fig. 3). Following the initiative of our informants, the focus of our conversations concerned the ancestors and funeral traditions. In some houses, I noticed some clothing in the corner. The clothes symbolized the recently deceased, those who had died in the past year (Fig. 4).

In the evening, we met Roza, Anastasiya and Marusya. Marusya said, "We are going to celebrate ancestors to the festival field." The field was empty; it was very dark, but the nightingale was singing, and the air was full of waiting. We went to get some firewood to make a bonfire. We met some villagers. All the women began to wonder if the priest would come to bless the bonfire. We waited, but the priest did not come. Only women were present. There were approximately 10 of us. It was very cold; we wore jackets and trousers. A few women wore the Mari dress. We brought firewood, and, at last, one of Marusya's guests arrived, a man who was originally from the village, but had moved to the city. He set fire to the bonfire, and the women jumped over it. Anastasiya began to sing, but nobody sang along. It was dark. We talked about former feasts and the role of the priest. At midnight, we went to the center of the village. In the main street, some girls and boys were laughing. The sound of someone playing an accordion came through the night. Marusya was very disappointed: "Where is the priest? Would it be my duty to direct the feast and to bless the fire?" We think that without the head of the feast, the old



*Fig. 4. The clothing in the corner symbolizing the recently deceased, Uncho, 2004.  
Photo: Ildikó Lehtinen*

women celebrated the feast in their traditional way, but the young people just spent a Friday night out (Lehtinen 2004).

On Saturday, the villagers and the guests from the villages of Yoshkar-Ola neighborhoods spent the Ancestor's Day in the cemetery. The atmosphere was nice. The families had some meal to eat, and all the people invited each other to commemorate the deceased. We also met the priest, and Marusya began to question him about the previous night. The priest said that nobody had asked him to bless the fire.

The feast of commemoration is a hard one. In all the families, there are deceased. The day of commemoration is very hard. The atmosphere was very oppressive because the women remembered the past. For the women, the bonfire could be an event with blessing, but also with some music, because the songs help to ease and forget the sorrow. Without the blessing of the priest, the feast was without

meaning. Marusya repeated, "What about the ancestors?" "What is the opinion of the ancestors about this kind of feast and about us?"

For the villagers, the ancestors mean the continuity of their traditional life, which is the Mari identity. The spontaneous feast was the culmination of the social contacts and relations. It revived and reinforced the relationships between the villagers and relatives from different neighborhoods. The ritual stressed the role, contribution, and activity of women and the role of women in the preservation of the traditional culture. The importance of food emphasized the female element in the celebration of the Ancestor's Day.

### **Conclusions**

Why are the Mari women still active? How were the rituals of Mari performed at cultural festivals?

As multisensory, multifocal events, festivals may extend over days, weeks, or months. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett regards festivals as cultural performance par excellence (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 59, 61, 62). For example, the Mari Flower Festival in the summer is an event where people eat, take walks, meet friends and acquaintances, watch performances, and sing and dance. People participate with all their senses, including taste, smell, sight, hearing, and touch. The festival also entails a factor that unites a people or a local group—a heritage or folklore which is comparable to shared history or memory.

Stuart Hall points to the danger of an approach whereby tradition is regarded as if it were an historical and unchanging cultural form with an unchanging or stable meaning or value (Hall 1981: 234). The organizers of festivals thus have a great responsibility for defining their content and for what is meant by such concepts such as traditional or authentic. Could a festival, with its perpetuation of traditional practices, be compared to a living museum?

Anthony Giddens regards it as possible that customs that are remnants of traditional practices may develop towards a so-called living museum (Giddens 1991: 142). On the other hand, local customs are traditions arising from the initiative of the community and containing the seed of change. In the globalized world, artefacts associated

with major traditions, among which folklore festivals can be included, could readily become relicts. National costumes can be seen as a typical examples of how a local or regional artefact can be redefined and made static. At the events I have analysed, national costumes are like museum artefacts placed on view for everyone to see (Lehtinen 2006: 45). The festival, however, lives and changes, and is included in our activities in the postmodern era. In the 1980s, the Maris and other peoples began to stage various kinds of folklore events, which have become cultural and folkloristic events, which do not necessarily have any particular objectives, and include the oral or material heritage or both. Song and dance performances, along with demonstrations of crafts, as well as exhibitions of national costume, have been used to reinforce Mari identity.

There are various forms and expressions of identity. The cornerstones of national identity, which can be seen as both implicated with but distinct from ethnic identity, are numerous: language, shared history, shared memory, oral tradition, and cultural heritage, including food, familiar scents, and everyday practices and costumes; in other words, folk culture as a whole. National symbols, such as flags, coats of arms, and folk costume are visible symbols, with very different histories and sources. The spontaneous Mari rituals could be compared to the habits of everyday life, which are semi-automatic and often unconscious. These rituals, as part of the everyday life, are transferred from mother to daughter without much ado, unremarked in their everyday ordinariness. Cleanness, bathing in the sauna, washing clothes and cooking are included among these traits and virtues of the everyday and ordinary, including scents and tastes, and can be construed as intangible values. The habitual survives, being as stable as heritage, and, perhaps, even more substantial, preserving memories of parents, grandparents, and identity. Heritage events, offering feasts and folk celebrations operate visibly and symbolically, in the private sphere of the community and home, as well as in the public sphere of organized festivals which emphasize identity and proclaim a shared unity, in the same way that national flags and hymns call forth a created national identity.

## Notes

1. Kolkhoz 'a Russian collective farm'.
2. Shashliks 'meat grilled over charcoal'.

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