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Sacred Rituals and Calendar Festivities in the Annual Cycle of Udmurts

Abstract. This article examines the interaction between Udmurt traditional rituals and newly imposed Soviet festivities. Udmurt sacred religious rituals have been modified during the Soviet period and official events have absorbed traditional elements. The author concentrates on the peculiarities of transformation from one status of the festivals to another and considers the reasons for transformation and the methods of transitions. The author also examines the origin of new types of festive activities, which developed their internal structure under persistent external influences.

Keywords: calendar events, culture, sacred rituals, Soviet period, the Day of the October Socialist Revolution, tradition, Udmurts, winter solstice.

Introduction

The changing role of religion, modern social processes, and rituals which have been invented and modified to fit with the present time all incorporate a renewal of ritual significance. The question is whether during this period of incorporation religious values truly have been replaced by the new secular values.

I begin with a short review of some rituals of the southern Udmurt diaspora groups. This review includes an interpretation of the ritual life of the rural inhabitants and an overview of the calendar rituals and customs that have always permeated and are still permeating the values of their way of life. Among these diaspora groups there are also those who have left their villages during the last decades and are living now in urban areas. These people remain deeply engaged with the ritual life of their native villages.

This article is based on long-term field research as well as several short interviews of the diaspora members during the summer of 2015.

It is well known that life in the countryside is more conservative and that villagers preserve traditional culture better than urbanites. The case of the southern Udmurt diaspora confirms this thesis.[1] Various modernizing processes were carried out during the Soviet period, having touched all Russian provinces, including small villages and ethnic groups. The elaboration of the new ideology in Soviet Russia did not develop naturally. New historical events, rituals, and customs were introduced in the life of all the Soviet citizens, and many of them were created as part of the modernization process. People felt that they needed to be tolerant towards the new ideology and to accept almost all the innovations, since the Soviet system had been fighting for it and persecuted those who did not conform. However, the extent of the implementation of new ideas though was not the same everywhere. This meant, first, that not all innovations were entirely accepted, adopted and thus resulted in real change. Second, several parallel inventive initiatives appeared; they were working towards a merging of the old values with new trends. As a result, it may be better to say that Udmurt people neither adopted nor rejected entirely the innovations introduced by the Soviet propaganda, plans, and programs; they instead created a multifaceted festive system.

Most of significant events of the new system coincided with the main Udmurtian traditional religious and ritual undertakings. It was impossible to give up all aspects of the familiar feasts and rituals and turn immediately to new festive days and practices. New ways of coming out from those exceptional circumstances were being invented, and these ways would not be overtly opposed to the new rules and at the same time would not exclude old traditions. Beginning in the 1930s, one of the tasks of the Udmurt traditional society was to preserve the old festivals and to include the Soviet innovations.

I will consider here two types of festive events: (1) traditional sacred rituals linked with specific dates, which co-existed with the newly introduced Soviet model of celebration (autumn commemorative rituals and the October Day), and (2) new festive days, which were introduced during the Soviet period and acquired their own symbolic meaning. I will reveal the motives of cultural transformations, the methods of transitions, and the process of forming new festive events.

Autumn festivals: interaction of official and traditional features

The first type of festival event, the most important one in the new Soviet official calendar, is the October Revolution Day or the October feast on the 7th of November.[2]

In the past, this was the time of the autumn ritual prayers, followed by a festive meal. Kinship groups celebrated the end of the harvest (*juon* or *jumshan*), and it was organized as follows: every family prepared food and beverages, and they gathered in the sacred sanctuary (*Kuala*) by the oldest kinship member to pray and to worship the kinship protector-progenitor. Afterwards the relatives ate and drank, and the gathering was accompanied by music, dances, and songs.

One group celebrated for a few hours with a definite family, and then all of the guests and participants moved to the next house, to another kinship member's family. Eating and drinking, music, and entertainment continued the same way, so that the feast moved from one house to another throughout the night, lasting until the morning. If there were many kinship families, the celebration continued the following evening with the same sequence of eating and drinking, music, and entertainment.

This festival experienced significant changes during the Soviet period. It partly merged with the new festive actions of November 7. (For much of the 20th century it was a national holiday—a day off.) At the very beginning, when the Soviet life style was first incorporated and the *village clubs* (*selskiy klub* in Russian; *shudon / jumshan korka / jurt* in Udmurt) or the *houses of culture* (*dom kultury* in Russian) were built up, new events were arranged in new public places. As I have already mentioned, many new events coincided in time with the traditional rituals, and the authorities worried that people would not attend the official celebrations. Nonetheless, perhaps by the habitual way to participate together in the common rituals or being forced and obliged by the Soviet authorities, almost all villagers took part in the Soviet festivals. The detailed scenario of this October celebration had been developed by the 1930s. In the evening, a political lecture and report of the *kolkhoz* leaders

on the work plan was organized.[3] Afterwards there was a concert of amateur theatricals or folklore groups, which was much more favourable part of the event.

When this Soviet-sponsored event was accomplished, traditional folk acting (*shudon*) started right there: villagers participated in folk dancing and singing in the *houses of culture*. A festive meal was prepared in the first half of the day, in advance, in people's homes. Thus, villagers could easily turn from one action to another. After this common part of the festivity, each kinship group went to celebrate *juon / jumshan* in their families. The feasts in the houses continued during whole night and ended in the next morning, as they had in former times. But the first religious part of this ritual with prayers was not performed anymore; it was organized beforehand secretly in the family of the oldest kinship member and the ritual food was divided among all relatives, including the children.

Interestingly, here we have two conflicting parts of the same old ritual. Due to the fact that they were forbidden, the religious customs became concealed. Hence another part of this ritual developed and was in progress. Furthermore, the gathering of all people in the village club raised the spirits of the community members and inspired them emotionally. This was no longer a religious event, yet the villagers came together as they had for the traditional rituals. Thus, the Soviet event did not disrupt the traditional feast completely.

One should take into account the fact that the Soviet October Day and the *juon / jumshan* feasts were not celebrated together with children. In the middle of the twentieth century, the celebration of the October feast among the schoolchildren and the celebration for adults were held separately. For the children it might be organized at schools as well as in the village clubs on the eve of the actual holiday, and the Soviet event for adults was held on the following day, as described above.

As time went by, in the 1950—1960s, the autumn prayer and the *juon / jumshan* feast were again modified. Some days or even weeks before the October Day, the religious ritual was conducted secretly by the kinship group in one of the families. The dates for the second part of the autumn traditional festival *juon / jumshan*—feast, food,

and entertainment—were moved to the October Revolution Day. At this time, it was not only celebrated religiously and exclusively for the kinship groups; there now could be some friends and colleagues present at the feast.

The next obvious changes began in the 1980s. They are explained by migration processes of the villagers to urban areas. The migrants maintained relations with the so-called "small homeland" and actively participated in the ritual life of their home villages. These "urbanized" Udmurts could not go home any time they wanted or when it would be suitable and necessary for the villagers. Certainly, they would visit their families in the village and keep doing it now. Since their visits have been irregular and most of the times occasional, this affected the traditional ritual calendar and contributed to the formation of the new one. This new calendar is used not only by the urbanized Udmurts but also by the villagers, who also have to adapt to the new situation.

Ceremonial events dedicated to the deceased and public commemorations became the focal point of the Udmurt calendar, where the influence of the urbanized style of life is very explicit. These are the most conservative aspects of the culture and also most prominent and well-established within the traditional Udmurt calendar. These commemorative events take place strictly in autumn and spring periods, and they now are firmly established in the new festive system. For the emigrants, the best opportunity to go home and pray for the dead and commemorate them was during the October revolution feast, which allowed for some days off. The urbanized relatives came to their kinsfolk to visit a cemetery and ritually "feed" the ancestors. Most of the villagers tried to avoid performing the commemoration ritual two twice (once with the family and once again with the visitors). They had to wait for the relatives to arrive from the cities and organize the ritual with them. Thus the date of this ritual merged gradually with the date of the October revolution.

Transformation of the winter solstice celebration

The next example is the ritual transformation within the period of the winter solstice. According to Udmurt traditions, this was the time when the great winter prayer ceremonies with special offerings

were held; the ritual was named *the winter praying* (*tol vös*) or some variation thereof (*uram vös, mör vös*), and it lasted for a week (being in line with the solar calendar). Udmurt sacred places usually are situated far from any settlements, and in winter they are beyond reach because of the abundant snow. Therefore, winter praying took place in the streets. In the past, Udmurts made animal sacrifices, cooked meat and soup or cereal, and all the dwellers of a village and its neighbourhood prayed together. When the religious part of the festivity was finished, people would dance and sing at small special places in the streets. By the end of the Soviet era, this worship had greatly diminished. People could no longer pray in the streets. This was possible only in some small villages consisting of one kinship group, where its members had no reason to fear that anybody would report their religious activity to the authorities.

Also by the end of the Soviet era, the New Year was celebrated according to the Gregorian calendar, and people used this opportunity for their own purposes. Beforehand they had prayed in their sacred sanctuaries (*Kuala*) or in houses; and afterwards they celebrated the New Year according to the Soviet rules (Minniyakhmetova 2014: 232). In its revived form the usual New Year celebration named "in a new fashion" (*vyl sjamen*) received some sacred features: people used the ritual food and behaved in the traditional manner, appropriate for this kind of situation. In the last decades, a new trend in celebrating the New Year developed: after praying and eating the sacred food at home, the youth gathered and celebrated it separately, without their parents and other adults. Recently, some efforts were made to conduct the ritual of winter solstice according to the old calendar and not to unify it with the celebration of the New Year according to the official calendar.

Conclusions

What do these two cases reveal? In the first case, both the traditional and official parts of the festive day were represented as celebrating of the October anniversary and were not persecuted. Celebration of the October Revolution Day in the Soviet style and the traditional *juon / jumshan* feast occurred on the same day, but these two events differed one from another. Hence, they could assimilate and assume a new identity. Although they each have undergone changes, these

traditional rituals still keep their names and the traditional ritual actions have managed to survive, at least partly.

The sacred ritual on the winter solstice represents a different situation. Being a purely religious event, it had to be completely destroyed and abolished by the atheistic Soviet regime. Despite all fights against it, people tried to find any surviving rituals and adapt themselves to the changed situation. The New Year celebration from the night from the 31st of December to the 1st of January was a new custom, but it was taken seriously and thus gained importance. Even sacred food from the previous ritual was allowed to be used during this new event. If people prepared new food expressly for this event, they still prayed in their houses for the successful New Year and afterwards ate and drank. This is a case of sacralisation of the official event; it included the elements of the traditional ritual of celebrating the great day that is considered as the beginning of the New Year.

There might be various reasons for the transformations, innovations, and preservation of the tradition. The main reasons were the fear of losing customs and responsibility for the tradition, and these reasons guided and inspired people's actions. Fear for the future and the belief that the universal order will be destroyed if old rules would not be fulfilled are still valid beliefs today.[4]

In the present article, I considered the cultural phenomenon that originated on the border of two types of culture: the traditional, collective culture, on the one hand, and the ideologically oriented, invented culture, on the other hand. I tried to show that ancestral and communal relations are the most topical and meaningful elements of the Udmurt culture, and that traditional culture penetrates the present-day reality as its organic component.

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Notes

1. The sacred rituals of the Udmurts were explored by many scholars, f.e. Vereschagin 1886; Pervukhin 1888; Smirnov 1890; Wichmann 1894; Harva 1914;

Vladykin 1994; Khristolyubova 1995; Sadikov 2012. Their studies are used in the present research as a basis for revealing elements of archaic customs, still existing.

2. The name of the festival refers to the anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution, celebrated on October 25, according to the Julian calendar, and November 7, according to the Gregorian calendar, which was introduced in the Soviet Russia in 1918.

3. *Kolkhoz* is the Russian abbreviation for the collective farming organization.

4. I would like to illustrate this thesis with an example. In 1996, young people appeared at the ritual *Yshtiyak Vös* held in the sacred place without appropriate clothes; the villagers regarded it as the irresponsible behaviour, which could destroy the ideals and lead to the situation when the prayer would not be successful. Perhaps this kind of the ritual behaviour evaluation is rooted in mythology. Udmurts have an etiologic myth concerning the origin of the world. The earth and the sky were very close to each other. Once, a woman laid the stained dirty napkins by her child on the sky to get them dried. The sky was insulted by this action and thus it decided to move away from the earth. As claimed by the myth, one can see that unclean things played a significant role in the creation of the world. Uncleanliness destroys the world order; this notion is reflected in many ritual regulations of Udmurts.

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