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Modern Folk Festivals in Tatarstan: The Paths of Development and Their Specific Features

Abstract. Contemporary festive rituals among the peoples of Tatarstan are being established in two different ways. Firstly, they are offered “from below,” as a popular initiative on the part of individuals and groups who seek to follow a tradition and to take part in the festive activities “as their soul commands.” Secondly, there is development “from above,” when festivals are initiated by various state and public structures, whose activities have their own goals and organisational means for their implementation. Specialized educational institutions also contribute to the development and maintenance of folk traditions. Based on the authors’ field-work materials and publications, the paper examines the specific ways in which festivals are conducted in Tatarstan by Russians and Tatars respectively, with a special attention to the two mentioned above tendencies. The case of the pagan festival *Uchuk* of the Chuvashs is also analysed in detail.

Keywords: folk festivals, history, modernity, peoples of Tatarstan, transformation.

Brief introduction to the Volga region peoples’ festivals and their development

Tatarstan (Republic of Tatarstan, RT) is a multiethnic republic and a part of the Russian Federation. According to population censuses, the representatives of 180 ethnic groups of Russia and the world live in RT. The Tatars (the titular ethnos of the Republic; 53,2 % of the population, 2010) and the Russians (39,7 %, 2010) belong to the ethnic majority. Among other ethnic groups of the all Volga region there are other (local) peoples—Chuvashs, Udmurts, Mordvinians, Maris, and Bashkirs who are substantially represented, as well as other peoples of Russia and neighbouring countries. Some ethnic communities have centuries-old history in the territory of Tatarstan; those

with a long history include the local people as well as Ukrainians, Armenians, Jews, Russian Germans,¹ and others. During the Post-Soviet period the number of migrants from Central Asian and Caucasian regions has increased considerably.

The festive culture of Tatarstan peoples developed in a variety of ways. The representatives of diasporas have brought, and are bringing, ready forms of folk festivals from their native places, and seeking to preserve these folks festivals in stable and consistent forms in the new environment. Festive cycles of Volga region peoples have been formed in similar natural-geographical and socio-economic environments, in conditions of extensive interethnic contacts, cooperation, and cultural interchange. As a result the folk festival cycles of various ethnic groups of Volga region, closely connected with similar economic activities in the past, are akin in many respects. In the beginning of the agricultural year, all these peoples have special rituals to see the winter off and to welcome the spring: Pancake week (*Maslenitsa*) typical for the Russians, Mordvinians, Maris (*Uyarnya*), Udmurts (*Voidyr*), Chuvashs (*Çävarni*); Crow porridge among Tatars (*Karga Botkasy*) and Bashkir (*Karga Tyi*). The plow festival (festival of a plow and arable land) is practiced among the Tatar and Bashkir *Sabantuy*; Chuvash *Akatuy*; Udmurt *Gyron Bydton*; Maris *Aga Pairem* and Mordovian *Baltai*. This festival marks the end of spring agricultural works. The above-listed calendar festivals of Volga region peoples are similar in meaning and form, even when the names of the festivals differ. There are many parallels similar to in other festive calendar seasonal cycles. Folk festivals are closely connected with the religious traditions of the region. Volga region peoples mainly belong to either Christian Orthodoxy (the Russians, Chuvashs, Mordvinians, Maris, Udmurts, Tatars-Kryashens²), or to Islam (the Kazan Tatars, Tatars-mishars³ and Bashkirs); some people from the ethnic groups of Chuvashs, Maris and Udmurts still follow their traditional folk religions (paganism, Pre-Christians).

The history of the development of the festive culture of Tatarstan peoples has gone through various processes. Up to the revolution of 1917, folk festivals were characterized by considerable stability and inertia, with little development and variations. It was supported by the firm position of the main public institution—the rural

community. Confessional distinctiveness of a group determined in general the nature of its culture which, however, did not interfere with the peaceful coexistence of various traditions, as well as their intensive interaction. Since the 18th century, Russian scholars and local experts have proclaimed that the fruitful dialogue of genetically diverse cultures was a distinctive feature of the region (Georgi, 1799; Lepekhin, 1780; Miller, 1791). Since then this tendency of co-existence and cooperation has only strengthened. It is especially important for understanding of ethnocultural, interethnic and inter-confessional processes in Tatarstan.

During the Soviet period (1917—1991), the festive culture in Tatarstan went through significant transformations. The separation of the Church from the state led to the disenfranchisement of many forms of vital activity, one way or another connected with religious tradition. New Soviet public holidays appeared—the New Year; International Women's Day on March 8th; the Day of the International Workers' Solidarity on May 1st; anniversary of 1917 revolution on November 7th; the Constitution Day; numerous professional holidays, completely secular (non-religious) and international (supra-ethnic). The main ideological function of new forms of festivities served to not only replace old forms and symbols, but to displace people's allegiance to older, more traditional, as well as religious, ways. For the majority of the adult population of the country, this transition from the traditional ritual year to a new one turned out to be very difficult and frustrating: they formally participated in the Soviet festivals, but, secretly, occasionally even without hiding their activities, they continued to celebrate traditional ceremonies. Underscoring this practice are documents of the State Archive of the Republic of Tatarstan that show that in the 1930s—1950s even the leaders of local party organizations took part in religious ceremonies which accompanied folk festivals. Our field materials confirm that, up to the 1990s, the religious folk tradition in various forms survived everywhere.

The post-Soviet period (since 1991 up to the present) marked a new round in the development of festive culture. Religious institutions regained their status, while folk festivals received legitimacy. Some of the folk festivals were listed in the official holiday calendar. As example of this new adoption can be seen in Tatarstan where public

holidays are marked as Christian Orthodox Christmas and Easter; Muslim Kurban-bajram and the Eid al-Fitr.

In Tatarstan, in the development of festive ceremonial rites of Post-Soviet time, two periods are clearly distinguishable. During the first period (in the 1990s), the renaissance of religious national holidays occurred spontaneously, massively and without any coordination from any religious or state institution. The faithfulness of the details of the festival to pre-Soviet era practices depended on the degree of the preservation of the rituals and the availability, and existence, of those who could perform it, as well as transmitters. Most of the Christian Orthodox feasts (Christmas, Easter, the Trinity, patronal village festivals) and Muslim (Kurban-bajram, Uraza-gaet, Maulid) were well remembered and preserved, and could be supported by the senior generation. In the beginning of the 1990s, there was a revival of sorts during which it became fashionable to be religious, and to be involved with festive practices, which led to an increased involvement of youth in these festive events.

An important change in festive culture occurred when a broad range of cultural organizations, through the decision of the First Congress of Peoples of Tatarstan (May, 1992), united into the Association of National-Cultural Societies of Republic of Tatarstan (ANKO PT; since 2007—the Assembly of the Peoples of Tatarstan; now it includes 85 national associations representing 35 peoples), see the Portal of the Assembly of People of Tatarstan. Since the establishment of the Assembly and unification of all the national organisations under one overseeing body, the Assembly's main task has been to oversee the revival and popularization of folk festivals.

By the turn of the 21st century, the tendency of state regulation of the festive activity in Tatarstan began to be exhibited in distinct ways. The second period of development of festivals is characterized by their scripting and preliminary planned character, as well as use of officially approved scenarios. This trend started after the folk festival *Sabantuy* was granted the status of the state festival (1992). In 1993, Chuvash *Ujav* received a similar, official state-sanctioned, status; Other such state sanctionings of festivals followed: in 1995—Mordovian *Baltai*; in 1996—the Ukrainian *Ivan Kupala*; in 1998—Udmurt

Gyron Bydton and *Mari Semyk*; in 1999—*Kryashen-Tatar Pitrau*; in 2003—Russian *Karavon*.⁴ Later some institutions were assigned to supervise republican festivals. Among these institutions are the administration on the implementation of the national policy of Tatarstan Presidential Department for internal policy; some structural units of the Ministry of culture of RT and the Ministry of education of RT. Much attention is given to this area of activity: for instance, the Chairman of the Council of the Assembly of People of Tatarstan is Farid Mukhametshin, who is, also and at the same time, the Chairman of the State Council (the Supreme body of legislative power of RT). While these actions are clearly a public relations move, the Republic authorities position it as a positive example of ethnic and religious tolerance. This alignment of the state with folk and religious has resulted in broad coverage by local media. Thus, the main focus has become the significance of each holiday in strengthening friendship and mutual understanding between the peoples of Tatarstan. As previously noted, however, there is a lot of historical truth in this perception of the holidays as an occasion for strengthening friendship and understanding.

The case of *Uchuk*

Meanwhile, the state interference in the run of the festive year in Tatarstan has changed the festivals a lot. Across the range of different festivals, the changes are similar. As such, we are using as an example one of the main festivals of the Chuvashs-pagans of RT *Uchuk* (or *Udjuk*, a sacrificial spring holiday) which has been preserved in its unmodified traditional form for a long time. In RT there are 31 settlements with pagan Chuvash population; in all of European Russia there are 42 settlements.

A universally recognized center of the Chuvash paganism in the Volga-Ural Region is the settlement Old Surkino⁵ in Almetyevsk district of RT (South-West of the Republic) (Yagafova, 2010: 44). It is inhabited by the descendants of the migrants who moved there from the territory of modern Chuvashia not later than the beginning of the 18th century, due to the threat of forced baptism. In the new ethnic environment (mainly the Tatars), the Chuvashs have adopted some cultural elements and, to a great extent, kept their own culture

and identity, the social and family rituals based on the traditional public belief (Stolyarova, 2006).

Up to the beginning of 2000s *Uchuk* (the sacrifice ceremony or the prayer to the field) was conducted after the end of the spring field work, according to centuries old practices. The elderly women who had authority, and were respected in the village, alerted all the residents about the time and place of the festival. Residents from every street collected money for the sacrificial calf and the food items for cooking a special cereal. The sacrificial calf was brought to a special place near a water spring. Residents splashed water on it with prayer and the men slaughtered the calf. A number of magic actions were observed in the process: it was necessary to bury all blood that came from the animal (otherwise one could step on it, and it would be a terrible sin); skin, hoofs, and entrails of the animal, and later bones from the eaten animal, were buried into the ground with the words: "And this is for you, eat it!" The head and sometimes the skin were hung on a tree. Thus, having butchered the carcass of the sacrificial animal, it was given to women who cooked the meat in a special pot. More pots were put out for cooking hot cereal from several ingredients: cereals (buckwheat and pearl-barley), potatoes, and oil.

The main population of the community arrived to the place of celebration by noon. Women usually wore traditional folk costumes; as a rule, for the elderly women, it was a wedding dress which later was kept on as the final attire for their funeral. Relatives of the local residents who lived in other regions also came to the festival. When everybody would meet up at the place of the ritual, the traditional praying began. The elderly women took part in praying, holding men's caps under their arms and slipping a man's jacket over their shoulders, as an accommodation from earlier strictures in which only men were allowed to offer prayers. Nowadays, there are only elderly women who are the keepers of the traditions. One of them, called a wise woman, would say a prayer addressed to a deity Tura (the Supreme deity); she asked her to grant favors (that harvest would be good and everyone would be alive and healthy, and to avoid disease, hurricane, etc.). When a prayer would come to an end, all the women participating in praying would start to dance in a ring

and sing folk songs. The festival ended with a joint meal and pouring water around as an invocation for enough rain.

Since 2007, the festival *Uchuk* has obtained the official status of a republican holiday and became known as the Open festival of Chuvashs of Zakamje region. In the process, the festival has been considerably changed. First of all, the initiative of holding festivals has passed from ordinary inhabitants to the local administration, which, in its turn, is guided by an official calendar of festive events approved by the republican authorities. All the costs have become centralized and are paid from the local (village and district) budgets. Participation by officials in the festival became obligatory: the highest statesmen of the Assembly of Peoples of RT; district administration; representatives of the mass-media. The official design of festivals has been drastically intensified: national flags of Russia and Tatarstan appeared; the decorated meeting place of honorable guests (Fig. 1); a registration table; badges and certificates of honorable participants; specially made symbols of the festival (booklets, charms, other souvenirs), etc.



Fig. 1. Meeting the guests of honor. Tatarstan, Old Surkino, holiday *Uchuk*. 2013.
Photo: Guzel Stolyarova

All the local residents involved in the festival (from the head of the settlement to younger schoolchildren) have to wear specially designed clothing decorated with national ornamentation. Authentic traditional pieces of clothing nowadays can be found only on the elderly women, who wear aprons with hand embroidery. The form of ritual glade has been cardinally changed: if traditionally, the food and the prayers were located in the center, now there is the main official performance is carried out (Fig. 2); along the periphery there are tents for selling souvenirs, various grocery and industrial goods as well as for exhibition of products of folk crafts appeared.



*Fig. 2. Performance by the folk ensemble of Old Surkino village.
Holiday Uchuk, 2013. Photo: Guzel Stolyarova*

The scenario includes official congratulations and giving awards to the best workers, the heroes of the day, the best pupils and compatriots from abroad, etc. The organizers aim to use the festival platform to promote the folk culture. Members of local amateur performing groups present different adaptations for stage related to the traditional Chuvash way of life, legends and tales of the Chuvash, traditional beliefs, etc. Traditional praying *Uchuk* still remains in the structure of the festival. The elderly women carry out this ritual



Fig. 3. Traditional prayer. Tatrstan, Old Surkino village, holiday Uchuk, 2013. Photo: Guzel Stolyarova

complex in compliance with all prescribed rites (Fig. 3), but this activity has lost its central place in the whole activity. Prayers are read on the periphery of the festival without participation of the general public. Ritual cereals are given to all the visitors but you cannot call it a collective meal. Many of the participants continue watching the performances. By the time that the meals of cereal were served, the state officials overseeing the festival had already left. Analogues of the described changes can be found in the festivals of other peoples of Tatarstan and outside it.

Conclusions

As with so many other kinds of change, the transformations of festive life and participation in this region have had both positive and negative consequences. On the one hand, financial and administrative support helps to perpetuate and prolong the life of traditional festivals, increasing the scale and public response. Our field materials

show the expansion of the numbers of participants in the festivals and the audience members, as well as the active aspiration of local leaders to preserve ethnic specificity. The use of native language, folk costumes, songs, dances, folk games, etc., has great consolidating value for local groups of people of Tatarstan including the younger generation. Simultaneously the international character of festivals plays its positive role for strengthening inter-ethnic relations. However, while innovations and promotion help to sustain festivals, they also threaten the authenticity of the festivals and the particular, and specific, individual ethnic contributions. For the most part, the majority of the population, in particular those actively participating in the preparation of the rituals and conducting them, are increasingly turning into passive spectators and becoming less competent in the essence of the matter. There is a concern that in the process of reducing the external support of festive activities, this lessened support could lead to the disappearance of the festivals and rites, as it may be difficult to explain to the younger generation what is the reason for this or that particular rite to be carried out. It seems that the academic community can play an important role in preserving that part of the ethno-cultural heritage which is still functioning today, through the careful study and distribution analytical materials to different audience and, in the first place, among the bearers of culture i.e. those who perceive them best and to whom they have intimate relevance.

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Notes

1. In Tatarstan, there lives a compact group of local ethnic Germans, who are descendants of the colonists of 18th—19th centuries.
2. Kryashens are an ethnoconfessional Christian group of Tatars.
3. Mishars are a Tatars' sub-ethnos.
4. As historical chronicles tell, from the middle of 16th century people from all over the region would come to the village of Russkoe Nikolskoe to worship

St. Nicholas. The people would pray, sing songs and dance a special circle dance karavon.

5. The field materials for this article have been collected by Guzel Stolyarova during ethnographic expeditions in the Old Surkino in 2000—2003, 2005—2007, 2009—2011, 2013.

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