

SPRING AND SUMMER SERIES OF PRAYERS OF *GERSHYD* IN THE VILLAGE OF VARKLET- BODYA

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The article is based on the material of the 1986-1989 joint ethnographical expedition organised by the Udmurt Museum of Regional Studies and the Estonian National Museum, to the village of Varklet-Bodya of the Agryz District, Tatar Autonomous Republic.

The village is situated in the north-western part of the district on the Varklet River (a tributary of the Izh), 45 km from the district centre of Agryz and 75 km from the town of Izhevsk, the capital of the Udmurt Republic.

There are 92 houses with 372 inhabitants in the village, 104 of whom are children of pre-school and school age, and 63 pensioners. In the village there are a surgery house, a shop, a club and a library, a primary school, as well as production premises and a garage.

Up to now the villagers have had close contacts with Udmurtia, more precisely with the villages of Kuzebayevo, Gord Namez, Söd Oshmes, Chumali of the Alnash district, and Karamas Pelga of the Kiyasovo district. They are active subscribers of the Udmurt periodicals: in 1989 there were 42 subscriptions to the newspaper *Sovetskaya Udmurtia*, 29 subscriptions to the journal *Kenesh*, 17 subscriptions to the children's magazine *Kizili*. From the central periodicals they subscribed to the newspapers *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Selskaya Zhizn* and the journals *Krestyanka*, *Zdorovye*, *Priusadebnoye Khozyaistvo*, *Za Rulem*.

According to the villager Anna Mikhailova (b. 1904), the village of Varklet-Bodya is over 300 years old. It is inhabited by people of the Bodya clan who came from the village of Malaya Purga, settled down on the Varklet river among the Tatars, in order to escape christening. They found that the place was a good choice: surrounded by forests, a river, and tilled fields presented by the Tatars; they even had a view of the Purga fields from the highest point of their estate. The place was named Shor Busy, 'The Middle Field'. At first six families migrated, among them A. Mikhailova's ancestors Babysh and his son Abysh. Abysh lived 80 years. The lineage was continued by Niyaz, Paul, and his son Salikh. Anna Mikhailova is Salikh's youngest daughter.

In Varklet-Bodya all the villagers have celebrated and celebrate even now the following holidays: in spring the Shrovetide (*Vöi*), Easter (*Akashka*), and *Byddzym Nunal*, in summer Whitsunday (*Gershyn*) and St. Peter's Day (*Kuarsur*), in autumn the autumn festival *Pokrov* (*Kiston*), and on December 19 St. Nicholas' Day of winter. Udm. *Nikola yuon dyr*).¹

Near the village there are old sacred places. Autumn sacrifices and prayers were carried out in the sacred groves (*lud*). People sacrificed geese to the malevolent gods.² Only male members of the community could take part in these ceremonies. For 20 years there have been no rituals in the sacred grove, but superstition and fear have remained – women are still afraid to pass the place, nobody walks beneath the sacred trees, where the rotten benches are still lying. In an *Akashka*-grove people still cook ritual porridge at Easter, to celebrate the coming of age of girls. The grove called *Yirpyd Soton Inty* is a place where offerings are brought for the ancestors.³ Commemoration of the deceased (*Kuyaskon*) takes place in two sites.⁴ Near the village there is a glade for the ritual of *Yu Vös* – prayer at the winter fields,⁵ and another for the spring or summer prayer festivals of *Gershhyd*. In the village there is a tribal sanctuary called *byddzym kualala*, where Shrovetide, Easter and St. Mikolay's Day prayers were held until 1975. The last priest of the sanctuary was Pisleg Yakovlev (b. 1901), who accompanied all prayers on his harp. Today, his harp is in the keeping of his son G. Pislegov (b. 1933),⁶ and the warden of the sanctuary is Y. Petrov (b. 1919). All ritual accessories – towels, dishes and the *vorshud* shelf⁷ are still there, because people believe that these should not be removed from there, but should rot in time together with the prayer house.

Every year after the kolkhoz festival *Sabantui* at the end of the spring field work, the villagers of Varklet-Bodya celebrate the prayer festival *Gershhyd* ('plough soup'). This festival also marks the end of the spring sowing, and is to ensure rain, warmth, and sunlight for the plants, and peace, happiness, health and welfare for the villagers. The prayer festival lasts for 9 days, one of them coinciding with the Orthodox holiday of Trinity. During the prayers people pay homage to the most important deities (Inmar, *Mu-kylchin*, *vorshud*), and make sacrifices. The series of prayers begins with *Vös Nerge*, a family ritual, with only the male relatives participating; this ends with a *Kuyaskon* – commemoration of those who have died far from home (e.g. killed in battle). The prayers take place in the following succession:

Day – *Vös Nerge*;

Day – *Yu Vös* – prayer on the winter fields;

Day – *Kuyaskon* – commemoration of the dead;

Day – *Kunyan Kenere Pyron* ('entering the calf paddock') – asking the gods' permission to start prayers on the glade called *kunyan kener* ('calf paddock');

Day – *Chuny Vösyen* ('blessing of the foal')

Day – *Mu-kylchin* – a prayer in honour of the creator and protector of the Earth;

Day – *Yibyrtoon* – prostration to Inmar;

Day – *Aktash* (Tatar, ‘white stone’) – a prayer to malevolent deities;

Day – *Kuyaskon* – prayer for those who died in a foreign land or were killed in battle.

Before *Gershhyd* the oldest villagers gathered to discuss issues concerning the festival, including the days of the prayers (taking into consideration that the first prayer on the glade *kunyan kener* should not take place on Wednesday (*Vir nunal*)⁸, which is considered a difficult day). All the problems were solved with the help of the offering priests. Each prayer had its priest and assistants, who had to find out whether there were suitable animals for sale in the village, and to decide who should buy the sacrificial animals, and when. At the same time the villagers prepared for the festival. Adults abstained from alcohol for the whole week or more before the prayers (during the festival a small amount of vodka was consumed only at the commemoration prayers). Before each prayer people washed themselves in the sauna, prepared grits for the ritual porridge and flour for fresh bread. All ritual food, both at home and at the prayer sites, was cooked with clear water called *tyrvu*, which was fetched immediately before cooking. Today water is taken from the water-pipes. Here is a short description of every prayer-day.

The family prayer *Vös Nerge* takes place in the evening; ritual foods – porridge, leavened pancakes *taban*, egg-cakes *koregpus taban* and boiled eggs – are prepared at the day-time. In addition to the obligatory dishes people may eat other things as well. First, the relatives assemble in the house from which they count their lineage, afterwards all relatives are visited in due order. The prayer-leader is a man; the special prayer song *Vös Nerge Gur* is still remembered and used.

In former times the prayer *Yu Vös* took place on the winter cornfield. Until the 1940's the praying site changed according to the sowing order. After the collectivisation (i.e. establishment of collective farms) the elders appointed a meadow near the kolkhoz apiary as a praying-site, but soon it was changed into a pasture. Then the praying-site was transferred to the apiary. For many years Nikolay Ivanov (b. 1931) has served as the priest of the prayers. No animals are sacrificed at this prayer.

On five days the prayers take place on the glade *kunyan kener*. The villagers venerate this place, nobody goes there at other times, the grass is never cut, the trees are never clipped or felled, and the whole place is not littered. Smoking is forbidden there during the prayers; who wants to smoke must retire to some distance. Young villagers sing and play on another glade. When entering the praying-site, one must bow three times to the east; when leaving after the prayer, one must turn around clockwise once. An interesting legend tells how

this place was chosen for praying. Immediately after settling in the new place, the elders asked the wise *tuno* to find them a praying-site. *Tuno* told them to fetch an unbroken colt, mounted it, and set off, grasping its mane. He galloped for a long while, then stopped and told them to light a fire. Then he plunged into the fire and burned to ashes. When he rose from the ashes, he was unhurt, but there were some stains on his white clothes. *Tuno* rode on, had another fire made, plunged again into the fire and rose from the ashes. This was repeated until he found a place where he rose from the ashes pure and unstained.

On the edge of the clearing there are some birches, planted about 100 years ago, and their branches are used at the rituals. Until the 1950's the clearing was protected from the cattle with a fence, which must have given it its name *kunyan kener*⁹. On the east and west sides of the glade there are gates. Each household was assigned a part of the fence, for which they were responsible. At present the fence is no more, but people hope to build a new one. The first three prayers take place in the central part of the glade (every day the fire is lit in a new place), the fourth one in the south-eastern part, and the fifth one in the north-eastern part. Before each prayer the priest with his assistants put the glade in order. To the right (the women's side) they set a long bench, which was made from a whole tree-trunk with roots in the early 1950's. To the left (men's side) they place two shorter benches and a ritual table. The latter is covered with birch twigs, over which they spread a special white table-cloth. Another symbolic table of birch twigs is laid on the ground. Over the fire-place they place a birch crossbar on two birch pillars. This construction symbolises a gate for the deity. They also prepare a shelf called *vyle mychem*, on which the prayer leader later places blessed bread and porridge. In the meantime his assistants collect firewood, prepare the ritual accessories (kettles, etc.), fetch clear water *tyrvu* and drinking water. At about noon the villagers begin to arrive with their ritual bundles. They bring a bowlful of grain for the porridge, a plate with ritual bread and a small bowl of butter, all wrapped in a special white 70 x 90 cm table-cloth (*vösyaskon dzhökkysht*). All these items are used only during prayers. After that the table-cloth is washed, the dishes are packed and put aside until next year. During commemoration feasts, however, they use ordinary tableware. For every prayer (except commemoration of the dead) they bake bread, using clear water (*tyrvu*) to make the dough. If someone is not able to bake the bread for him/herself and buys a loaf from the shop for the prayer, he/she must wash it with clear water. For the prayers of *Yibyrton* and *Aktash* they bake unleavened cakes *kuarnyan* ('leaf-bread'). Every newcomer goes to the symbolic table on the ground, lays his or her bundle on the birch twigs, unties it, spreads the table-cloth on the twigs, takes a knife and cuts the end of the loaf of bread, spreads butter over it and puts it in the ritual bowl by the table. Three cakes

must be placed into the common bowl. This is the common practice at every prayer. Each household brings a bowlful of grain for the porridge, and spoons for every member of the household. The porridge is cooked in two kettles. When there are already more than five slices of bread in the common bowl, the priest with his assistants blesses it, and one of the slices is placed on the offering shelf *vyle mychem*. Then the fire is lit, and after the following prayer three slices of bread are offered into the fire. Then the bowl of bread is placed on the table at the men's side, and men eat bread and butter. The priest is the first to take a slice, then his assistants, then men and boys. Women must not approach the ritual table, and for them bread and butter is taken over to their side. During the prayer *Mu-kylchin* three slices of bread are put into a hole dug specially for the earth spirit. Before killing the sacrificial animal they appeal to gods, asking them to bless the animal. For that they touch the animal three times with birch twigs, and pour some clear spring-water over its back, at which the animal is supposed to give a start. Then the priests can see that the god is pleased with the sacrifice. Nowadays all prayers are accompanied by the sacrifice of a white ram (except that dedicated to the earth spirit); some blood, broth and porridge is thrown into the fire, together with the bones of the animal. The sacrificial animal for the earth spirit is a black ram. The animal is bought from the village, and the price is agreed on only after the prayer. The price depends on the weight of the animal, and is usually between 60 and 75 roubles. The money is collected from all participants. In 1989 each household paid 4 roubles for the purchase of the sacrificial animals. In addition to that, priests collect donations during the prayers of *Chuny Vösyen* ('blessing of the foal') and *Yibyrton* ('Great Prostration'). In former times people used to donate silver coins on these occasions, nowadays they give white coins and bank notes. In any case, the money is washed with clear water before donating, and it is placed either in a special bowl or on the ritual table not with one's hand, but with a kerchief. The donations are blessed with a prayer. In 1989 the total sum of donations was 65 roubles. The money is given in a priest's keeping. In 1989 the villagers elected the *Yibyrton* priest A. Timbekov (b. 1934) to be the keeper of money. Besides money you may always donate all kinds of things. So, a young wife attending a prayer for the first time after the marriage, gives a towel as her offering, and asks for the well-being, health and happiness for both close and distant relatives, children, and for herself.

During the prayers of *Yibyrton* and *Aktash* candles are lit and people kneel. After the prayer of *Yibyrton* three fires are lit simultaneously in the prayer sites of the *Chuny Vösyen*, *Mu-kylchin* and *Yibyrton* prayers, and the priest throws the branches that were left from the prayers of the previous year into the fire.

Until the 1950's the priest wore special white clothes; so did the elder generation, asserting that Inmar (the highest deity) was fond of white clothes. At present these white clothes are used no more, but wearing the ritual belt (*puto*) is obligatory. Especially respected is the prayer of *Yibyrton*. On this day people put on their best clothes, the young wear decorations on their breasts.

Naturally, there are no such classic prayers any more, which the older generation still remembers. Much is forgotten, many of the magical actions performed by the priests during the prayers cannot be explained; practically half of the excellent words of the prayer leaders have been forgotten; and yet, the deep respect for the sacred groves has survived. At the time of the *Gershud* all those who have left the village assemble here again.

Translated by Kai Vassiljeva

Commentaries

¹One must not forget that the village of Varklet-Bodya has never been converted into Christianity, and so the calendar festivals that were associated with church festivals among christened Udmurts, retained some of their earlier significance for the Udmurts who were living among the Islamic Tatars. There the church calendar has affected only the names of the festivals, and caused some temporal shifts in the folk calendar.

²In the sacred grove people made sacrifices to the grove spirit *lud kuzyo*, who was often called with the Turkic name *Keremet*. The grove spirit is generally considered to be more strict than the other spirits – he could not tolerate dirt or sloth, women and drunken men could never enter the sacred grove, etc. Islamic influence on the grove spirit is reflected in the ban for the grove priest (leader of the sacrificing rituals) to eat pork.

³*Yirpyd Soton* ('the giving of head and legs') – the custom to sacrifice the head and legs of a horse to one's deceased father, and those of a cow to one's deceased mother. It developed from the offering ritual *Val Syuan* ('the wedding of the horse', also *Mydlan Syuan* 'reverse wedding'), where the whole animal was sacrificed.

⁴The name is derived from the verb *kuyany* – 'to throw, throw away, throw down, leave'. Today both places for the commemoration of the deceased are connected with particular trees.

⁵Today these prayers take place in the apiary of the collective farm.

⁶It was a common practice among unchristened Udmurts even in this century that one of the sons had his father's first name for his family name, another son that of his grandfather, etc.

⁷*mudor* – situated on the wall at one end of the prayer house. On this shelf there was the box of offerings for the tribal guardian spirit *vorshud*.

⁸*Vir nunal* – Udm. dial. 'The Day of Blood'.

⁹The prayer sites had to be pure – i.e. no domestic animals should enter the area.

Commentaries by Aado Lintrop

IN THE RANGE OF DEMONOLOGICAL BELIEFS

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In the Carpathian villages where research has been done¹ people have believed such in supernatural beings as the nymph, the changeling, the souls of the deceased and the miscarried child, the noon-ghost, the nightmare, the ghoul, the water-spirit, a will-o'-the-wisp, the air-spirit, the devil and the witch.

Some of them have survived in folk tradition till modern times – in more or less modified forms – becoming the evidence of a bygone period. One of the reasons for it was the adaptation of the contents of beliefs into Christian religion, which facilitated the presentation of the supernatural beings in a different light. This became possible through the introduction of religious elements into magic practices. Apart from this, supernatural beings have survived in traditions through their identification with the source of evil, condemned by the Church. As a result of this, these beings have become the personifications of the negatively evaluated human behaviour.

Among the most significant moments in one's religious life was baptism. According to the beliefs of the inhabitants of the Carpathian villages under study, the period between birth and baptism was particularly dangerous for a child. It was a consequence of the fact that the child had come into the world in the biological, and not ritual, sense. The latter was accomplished through baptism, whose function was both religious and magical. It introduced the child into the Christian world and committed it to God's care. At the same time it protected the child from all evil powers, which might be a threat to it.

Above all, a lying-in woman should have complied with some orders which the traditional system of folk beliefs contained and which were connected with the main Christian ceremonies. Among other things, she was expected to have her child baptised as soon as possible. A delay in baptising the baby brought the risk of it being kidnapped by a nymph (*boginka*), who left her own child in its place. The changeling (*odmieniec*) was easily recognised, as it was ugly, often crippled, and cried a lot. Besides, it possessed traits which had never been characteristic of a human baby: right from its birth it could walk, talk and