

# TIME AND SPACE IN DREAM TELLING: THE UDMURT EXAMPLE

**Tatiana Minniyakhmetova**

*Independent Researcher, Innsbruck, Austria*

*Email: minnijah@hotmail.com*

**Abstract:** Dreams and the telling and retelling of dreams are popular customs in people's daily lives. This study focuses on the process of dream telling, which implies time and space, and how the situation of telling a dream becomes ritualistic.

The content of a dream is very important (it can be good or evil) and therefore it is believed and perceived that dreams are signs that both dreamers and listeners will follow. The article will consider these ideas according to the traditional world-view of the Udmurts.

**Keywords:** dreams, telling of dreams, meaning of dreams, time and space in dream telling, Udmurts

The study of dreams, the telling and retellings of dreams, and narratives about dreams is just a grain of the traditional knowledge and wisdom of an ethnos. It is not a popular and developed subject of study and has not yet received wide or comprehensive examination in folkloristics, ethnography, ethnology or anthropology. Certainly, there are numerous publications dealing with this topic in its diverse aspects, for example dreams as a manifestation of the unconscious, dreams as a manifestation of the irrational, and hallucinations are represented in primarily psychoanalytical research, although in some cases using ethnic examples. However, these studies do concern various aspects of dreams, some approaching the interpretation of dreams from the point of view of the cultural context of the dreamer.

There are different points of view and methods of approach to the study of dreams and dreams as a cultural phenomenon. According to Russian scientists, the images and plots of dreams and the way people feel about dreams largely depend on the type of culture that interprets the dream. At the same time, the rules of the dream narrative genre are constant in space and time (Lotman 1993: 119–126; Uspenskij 1994: 35–37).

There is a proposed idea that dreaming, or at least an ingenuous vision of dreaming, is an individual experience, but that the telling and retelling of dreams is a collective experience (Kaivola-Bregenhøj 1993: 213–217).

Hence, folkloristic and ethnological studies of folk interpretations of dreams are a perspective approach to the reconstruction of mythological notions as researching methods of logic and dynamic of traditional worldviews and perceptions of an ethnos or a group of kindred nations. The cultural context of an ethnos plays a significant role in the nature of dreams, defined as the cultural patterning of dreams (Lincoln 1935; Devereux 1951).

I adhere to the opinion that a dream is an expression of cultural diversity which absorbs and reflects the unique spiritual experience and diverse practices of humanity. In addition, it is necessary to take into account the religious views and confessional differences of the ethnic or cultural group (dreamers), which create significant differences both in the content of the dream and in its motifs of interpretation and meaning. In addition, we must take into account the individual experience of the dreamer, his or her ability to express the dream in words or retell other people's dreams.

This study is based on Udmurt folk material that focuses on the features, perception and understanding of dreams among the Trans-Kama diaspora group, followers to a particular set of traditional beliefs. One of the ideas of the topic is considering "the conception of space always refers to some extent to the conception of time; any orientation in space presupposes orientation in time, and vice versa" (Minniakhmetova 2016: 56). In this regard, these dimensions, time and space, play an important role in the process of dream telling, a situation which itself becomes ritualistic. In the telling of dreams, the content of the dream itself is important, for the understanding and comprehension of which a deep knowledge of "the logic of the Udmurt folklore world-text itself" (Vladykina 2018: 5) is necessary.

The topic of studying dreams in Udmurt folklore studies and ethnology has not been developed, and in many of its aspects the issue is not considered. Studies of dreams have been published, in which scientists have used dream ideas to reconstruct mythological conceptions about the soul or souls, death, the image of deceased ancestors and contact with them, the other world and the relationship between the worlds of the living and the dead. There are folk explanations of dreams in some studies with most of the remarks and ideas about dreams concerning how in dreams it is possible to foresee the future and what the dreamer or others should expect in accordance with the meaning of the dream (Harva 1911: 126; Khristolyubova 2003; Minniyakhmetova 2008; Sadikov 2008: 153; Anisimov 2017: 73–79; Anisimov, Toulouze 2021). Some publications discuss the notion that it is possible to control or manipulate dreams. Nevertheless, there are no studies that consider the phenomenon of dreams from different points of view by taking into account primarily Udmurt folkloristic and ethnographic material.

In Udmurt folkloristic studies, dream telling is a ritual behaviour not only of the dreamer him- or herself but also of the listener or listeners. The telling or retelling of dreams should be kept in mind with dreams, and their told and retold versions, considered a specific narrative by the dreamer and others. In the Udmurt language the word 'dream' is *vöt / ujuvöt* (dream/night+dream or sleep), the process of telling a dream is *vöt / vötez / ujuvötez veran* (dream/night dream telling or narration). A dream told as a narrative is defined as *vöt* (dream) or *veram vöt* (told dream). A dream does not mean anything to others if it has not been told or retold by a dreamer or others to

somebody else. Actually the telling of a dream means creating a kind of a verbal story, a transformation of what one saw in the dream. The retelling of the same dream by others is transmission of the heard dream or of its interpretation. One cannot describe in detail one's own or someone else's dream, and one cannot add one's own fantasy to dream content by telling about a dream with the intention of clarifying the meaning. Every dreamer, in telling his or her dream or retelling a dream, concentrates on the plot (if there is any plot or motif in the dream at all) as a whole, or on some particular expressive moments and details of the dream. But in some dreams different things, objects or actions (in general, they are all symbols), are concentrated and are not connected with each other in any way. In this dream no explanation can be found and no thematic decoding or goal can be found. We can simply name the symbols from this dream, what was seen at the beginning, the second time, etc., and in this case, in talking about this dream, we try to give explanations and meanings of the symbols and consequently try to find possible causes and motifs for connection. However, dream interpretation means finding hints, speculating, and guessing probability for only some meanings, since "one dreams of many images that relate to each other in different ways" (Lazareva 2020: 14).

The Udmurt have no special dream interpreters. And not everyone is able to describe their dreams or, even more so, give an explanation or shed light on the meaning. In fact, a person's ability to tell dreams is related to real life values and experiences, and, in addition, the skills of the story/dream teller and the gift of speech. Knowledge and experience interpreting the meaning of dreams programs a person's behaviour (here I proceed from the idea by Y. M. Lotman "a dream as a reserve of semiotic uncertainty, vagueness") (Lotman 2000: 126). But a dream needs an interpreter. In the family, the main interpreters are usually the older members of the family, who have both life experience and an understanding of dream symbols. Adults are able to tell their dreams more or less clearly. With children's dreams, older members of the family can ask the child leading questions for a more detailed insight into the meaning. In each case there is great difficulty in communicating with the dreamer whose dream language can only be understood by themselves. Dreams are very individual and it is impossible for anyone to penetrate someone else's dream.

Time and space in the telling of narratives is an unexplored issue in folklore studies in general. In the Udmurt culture, time and space create certain limits to storytelling and especially to dream telling, although there are some exceptions to traditional norms in modern urban culture. As for dreams, we can talk about time and space as dimensions in the narration of dreams. This means that in the process of telling dreams, the dimensions of both time and space become a special status, they become ritualistic and ritualised. This traditional feature of time and space is practiced in all day-to-day and ritual situations. To understand this thesis, let's give a few examples. For instance, in everyday life, one cannot eat at night. However, those attending a wedding ceremony must eat and drink from the evening to the next morning, i.e. all night. The same situation is observed in rituals of commemoration for deceased ancestors, when participants must entertain each other and treat themselves until midnight. Another example is that there is a widespread opinion that one cannot eat in the sauna, although when a stove was laid in a newly built sauna (meaning

a traditional Udmurt bathhouse with a stone stove), first of all the stove should be heated and pancakes should be baked in it, which should be given to family members.

Why does this happen? Why does a taboo lose its power? Here we should consider the phenomenon of transformation of dimensions, i.e. both space and time are transformed into ritual space and ritual time. Thus, ritual prescriptions begin to operate. Similar transformations are observed in the process of dream telling, when time and space also pass into ritual status.

Dreams and dream telling in everyday life play a significant role in Udmurt society to this day. It is generally believed that one needs to tell family members about one's dreams, and for this one needs to know the right time and the right place. First, here we will point out the taboo against dream telling at night, while in the sauna, visiting the cemetery, being near the deceased, visiting others or when in someone else's house.

Usually, dream telling is done in the morning while preparing or eating breakfast. As a rule, this happens at the stove in the female part of the house or at the dining table, which is in most cases located in the same female part of the house. There are some differences in the interpretation of dreams and omens among family members. If a father or grandfather had a dream, he will tell his dream to his father or son, or his wife. But if mothers or grandmothers have a dream, they will discuss it with each other and will not tell their dreams to their husbands. As a rule, children tell their dreams to their mother or grandmother. These cases demonstrate the gender aspect of the Udmurt dream telling tradition, although they are also observed in the dream telling traditions of other Finno-Ugric peoples (Sharapov 1995: 192).

Usually, in every culture, there may be some exceptions to the rule, as in the tradition of dreaming among the Udmurt. For example, if there was no one family or clan member at breakfast (i.e., a dreamer was alone having a breakfast) who could listen to the dream or dreams the dream(s) were not told in the morning of the same day. But if one needed to tell a dream on the same day, then one can do so even though the time is not right for it or if the night has come. So, in this case, one should address the dream to the stove with the words "*Gurly veras'ko*" ('I am telling the stove'). In fact, the dreamer tells his or her dream to a family or kinship member.

In general, for the Udmurt tradition both good and bad/evil dreams are characteristic. Based on this idea, one can react to a dream in one of two ways, i.e. by neutralising the expected consequences of bad dreams, or by actualising the desired results of good dreams. Logically, most reactions are associated with bad dreams or concern dreams that portend negative consequences. The performance of special ritual actions helps to get rid of the negative consequences of a bad dream. At the same time, everyone uses special words or verbal formulas when trying to protect themselves from the stories told and the development of consequences from their own dreams. Women play a prominent role in the actions of family members, in the listening dreams and interpretation of dream meanings, and in rituals performed to prevent so-called terrible consequences. These customs are still practiced today. When performing these actions, everyone must strictly observe spatial and temporal boundaries.

If the dream predicts something very negative, the mother or grandmother will take some precautions to avoid an unwanted omen. For example, a female family member will bake some food and 'feed' a person (usually a deceased female or another

dead family member, i.e. an ancestor) who visited him or her in a dream. If several females (who are also deceased) are 'seen' in a dream, a female from the family also prepares food and gives a few pieces to the dog, accompanied by words demanding that woman who visited in the dream leaves her or her family alone. This reflects the concept that by feeding dogs, female ancestors are warned to leave the dreamer alone. This is a way of telling ancestors not to destroy the peace in the family by taking someone to the other world. In other words, if a female or females appear in a dream, it is a bad omen suggesting that the dreamer or one of the dreamer's family members may die in the near future. "By feeding their female ancestors people try to avoid the fulfilment of these omens" (Minniyakhmetova 2008: 95). And this once again confirms the idea that "dream is one of the channels of communication with the 'other' world" (Pchelovodova 2013: 56). These actions, provoked by the meanings of dreams, indicate that dreams occupy an important place in the worldview of the Udmurt people.

The use of verbal formulas as ways to protect against negative consequences seen in dreams is common to all local and diaspora Udmurt groups. For example, when talking about a bad dream, one says "*Sjuresyz ogpalan med luoz*" ('Let it be far from me'; lit. 'Let the direction of the road (of the bad consequences of the dream) be away (from us)'), or another example "*medaz gozhty/gozhtymtäez*" ('Let it not be predestined/let it not be fate'). In these cases, formulaic expressions are very often used, representing an effective psychological method of avoiding stress. In my opinion, the following verbal formula is poetic and, apparently, is the oldest variation of verbal formulas. Thus, after the narration of the dream, if the meaning of the dream was seen as portending something negative, the dreamer or narrator of the dream should say "*Vötlän chyrtyez kuro zökta gynä, pe. Äjbet pala ke tilad, äjbet pala, pe, koshke. Alama pala ke tilad, alama pala, pe, koshke.*" (lit. 'The neck of a dream is as thick as a straw'. If someone wants the meaning of the dream to be positive/good, it will turn in a good way. If a person wants the meaning of the dream to be bad, then it will be bad' (i.e. according to the meaning of the dream, one can expect good or bad consequences, and one needs to try to change the expected consequences). These verbal expressions are very important 'tools' to protect against the negative consequences arising from the meaning of the dream.

The Udmurt, as a rule, should not tell their dreams outside the home or to visiting strangers. This opinion is popular and is associated with the belief that the meaning of the dream can influence and reflect on visiting family members. This idea suggests that the dream is necessarily connected with members of the kinship group, both living and dead.

One thing to consider here is that there are large families but also people living alone who have no one to tell their dreams to, in which case dreams will be told to relatives. Usually, in such cases, this person should tell the dream at home when one of the relatives visits. Of course, in this case, too, this must be done strictly according to the rules, i.e. in observance of gender and age differences, and temporal and spatial restrictions.

In some cases, I have noted the connection between the tradition of telling dreams and the stove. In the traditional Udmurt worldview, the stove is both a channel be-

tween the upper deities and the dead ancestors who have gone to the underworld. It seems here that we must consider the connection of the dream, and perhaps its origin also with the influences of external superficial forces, such as the spirits of deceased ancestors and deities. However, I am of the opinion that dreams are related to ancestors. This opinion is confirmed by the following observations.

Firstly, as noted above, if one has a dream, the meaning of which predicts some negative consequences, one applies to one's deceased ancestors for help and support. Secondly, in the morning one should tell one's dreams. The dreamer and the dreamer's relatives then have the opportunity to avoid the expected bad consequences during the day, or the dreamer can take some action to fulfil the positive expectations of the dream during the same day. The best time for this is early in the morning. Thirdly, if the dreamer has to tell his dreams that evening, i.e. after sunset, the dreamer applies to the stove. Perhaps this act could be interpreted or associated with deceased ancestors who are among the living after sunset and 'listen' to the narrator of the dreams. Therefore, the dream must be addressed to the stove, which is both creator and protector, and which can regulate the consequences of the meaning of the dream(s). The idea a taboo on dream telling after sunset because the dead are among the living seems likely; the same taboo exists to forbid dream telling in cemeteries or near the deceased. Thus we can connect the idea of the origin of the dream and the influence of the consequences of the dream with dead ancestors. Perhaps this is why the process of dream telling turns into a special ritualised action when time and space change their status.

Based on these examples and on this analysis, I would suggest the following conclusions:

- A dream is something very intimate and personal, something that needs to be protected from others, especially from strangers. Dreams should not be revealed to strangers;
- A dream is something related to the dreamer's relatives;
- Dreams are associated with the deceased, and primarily with deceased relatives;
- When telling and talking about dreams, one should take into account the listeners and the spatial and temporal dimensions of the telling situation;
- Dreaming, dreams, and dream telling is connected with the stove, the channel of communication between the upper and lower worlds;
- The dependence of these dimensions indicates that a dream is a special phenomenon, and the telling of dreams is perceived by the Udmurt as a special situation, i.e. the very situation of telling a dream becomes ritualistic.

Such a peculiar intimate phenomenon can have its own cultural context, on the basis of which it is possible to shed light on the meaning and significance of dreams. Some informants are inclined to believe that the dreamer finds him- or herself in another dimension when dreaming. This thesis has also not yet been considered in scientific research.

Here, for this study, the discussed examples and interpretations from modern life practice among pagan Udmurts or followers of traditional folk or ethnic religion were recorded. But Orthodox Udmurt will have a different interpretation, and have different motifs and meanings for the same dreams and dream symbols. Thus, we can conclude that religious views and confessional orientations play an important role in the context of dreams. Of course, here it is necessary to take into account the social environment and upbringing of a person as the family plays a significant role in the formation of personality.

At present, research on the semiotics of culture shows that folk interpretations of dreams are a stable universal mechanism for the transmission of a system conditioned by ethnic ideology or worldview (Uspenskij 1994: 35–37; Tolstoy 1993: 89–96). According to the Udmurt traditional worldview dreams have an active magical power that affects the fate of the dreamer and the dreamer's relatives. The telling and retelling of dreams is a constantly developing custom that occupies a special place and belongs to the living intangible heritage of this ethnos.

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## BIO

**Tatiana Minniyakhmetova** is a candidate of historical sciences (ethnography, ethnology and cultural anthropology) and PhD of comparative folkloristics. Her interests are the folk beliefs and ritual practices of the Udmurt, and the semantics of Udmurt ritual terms and expressions. She is an independent researcher.

E-mail: minnijah@hotmail.com