

INNOVATIONS IN THE EASTERN UDMURTS PRIESTHOOD

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Abstract: This report, based on the author’s field materials, is devoted to the consideration of the current state of the priesthood of the Trans-Kama (Eastern) Udmurts. It is shown that since the 1990s, with the revival of religious traditions, significant changes have taken place in the organization of the priests’ activities, dictated by the modern realities of life. The main criterion for their choice was the presence of positive moral qualities, in some cases their belonging to the “priestly family”.

Keywords: traditional religion, priests, contemporary situation, Eastern Udmurts.

The basis of the spiritual life of the Eastern Udmurts living in Bashkortostan and the Perm Region is their traditional religion. The guardians of their sacred knowledge, are, as in the past, the priests – servants of the traditional cult, responsible for conducting public and private religious events. The issues of the history and current state of the Udmurt priesthood are considered in sufficient detail in the ethnographic literature devoted to the traditional religion of the people. In recent years, dedicated works on this topic have appeared (Sadikov & Danilko 2005; Shutova 2010; Saberov 2015; Toulouze & Niglas 2017). This article discusses the identification of traditions and innovations amongst the institution of Priesthood among the Eastern Udmurts in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.¹

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the cult was served by several categories of priests and their assistants. The conduct of village-wide agricultural prayer-sacrifices was guided by *vösjas’* (*vösjas’kis’*)/*kuris’kis’*, *tylas’* and *partchas’*. The duties of *vösjas’* / *vösjaskis’* (‘priest’, literally ‘the sacrificing priest’ in Udmurt) included the recitation of prayers and the guidance of the ritual process at the sacrifices by the *vös’* / *vösjaskon*. An odd number of priests took part in them, usually three, the main one among them was called *badzym vösjas’* (‘the chief priest’). A *kuriskis’* (the ‘praying man’ literally ‘saying a prayer’ in Udmurt), led the prayers with none of the

bloody sacrifices of the *kuriskon*. Moreover, both terms used to refer to priests were interchangeable and were synonymous. A *tylas'* (literally 'throwing into the fire' in Udmurt), was an assistant priest, who watched the sacrificial bonfire, and, to judge by their name, threw pieces of food intended for heavenly deities into the fire. A *partchas'* (literally 'skinning the carcass' in Udmurt) stabbed and skinned the sacrificial animal. These ministers of worship were chosen at a village gathering. Special requirements were imposed on *vösjas'*: they could only be a socially-respectable, married man, over forty years of age, who was versed in the rituals and who knew the prayers – *kuris'kon*. (Sadikov 2008: 190). They usually performed their duties until their death, after which a new priest was chosen (Sadikov 2008: 190). Informants note that the priests, as a rule, prepared their successor themselves: they took notice of smart children and brought them with them to sacrifices, where they could learn rituals and prayers.

The cult of the wrathful deity *Lud*, which requires propitiatory sacrifices, was served by special priests *lud/keremet utis'/kuzë* ('guardian/master of the sacred grove'). According to informants, they had the right to direct sacrifices at this sanctuary only, but could by no means say prayers in honour of the supreme god *Inmar* or other celestial deities, because the prayers should not be "mixed up". The position of *lud utis' / kuzë* was hereditary, after his death it passed to the eldest son. If he did not have heirs, then the position passed to one of his assistants (*partchas'*). They kept order in the sacred grove of *lud/keremet* and conducted public and private sacrifices there. There were as many *lud utis'* in a village as there were sacred groves. Each priest would only pray in his own grove (Sadikov 2008: 57).

The prayers in the ancestral sanctuaries – *kuala* – and the veneration of ancestral deities *voshshud* were led by *kuala utis'/kuala kuzë* ('keeper/master of *kuala*') – a member of the clan, who was entrusted with priestly functions. This position was also hereditary, i.e. in the event of the death of *kuala utis'*, his son took his place.² If there was no heir, then the position passed to one of his male relatives (Sadikov 2008: 75). The priests of the ancestral sanctuary and the sacred grove were also helped at their prayers by their assistants, *tylas'*, who watched the fire, and *partchas'*, who stabbed sacrificial animals. The family and ancestral prayers *kuris'kon* were conducted by the householders and the eldest members of the family.

In the Soviet years, the traditional succession of priestly knowledge was broken. With rare exceptions, young people, did not want to engage in such "remnants of the past" for fear of ostracism and punishment from the school and the Komsomol organization. Some of the priests, under threat of persecution, stopped their religious activities. But most of them, remained committed to the traditions of their ancestors, continued to fulfil their duties. For example, in the village of Kasiyarovo in the Burayevsky district of what then was the Bashkir ASSR, the senior priest, Temirgali Nuriev (born 1905) was a great connoisseur of religious traditions. After the death of the *keremet kuzë*, he was forced to hold prayers also in the sacred grove, although according to tradition this was not meant to be done. Islam Armanshin was an experienced priest in the village of Nizhnebaltachevo in the Tatyshli district of the BASR, he was also a *kuala utis'* in the sanctuary of the family of *žumja*. As a rule, during the period of "developed socialism", the Udmurt priests worship were elderly people.

After their death, the sacrifices usually stopped due to a lack of successors. By this time, the householders had also lost their religious skills, and village priests began to conduct prayers at family celebrations.

Fundamental changes in this area of the spiritual life of the Trans-Kama Udmurts occurred in the 1990s, when, due to the liberalization of public consciousness, the process of revitalizing their traditional religion began (Sadikov & Toulouze 2017: 98). By this time, some experienced priests remained alive, who had received their knowledge from previous ministers of the cult, i.e. by priestly succession. Among them, it is necessary to mention the names of Minnigali Ziyangirov, born in 1920, from the village of Asavka Baltachevsky; Galim Galyakhmetov, born in 1929, from the village of Mozhga of Yanaulsky; Habibyan Tukhtakiev, born in 1931, from the village of Vyazovka; Nazip Sadriev, born in 1930, from the village of Malaya Balzuga; Rais Rafikov, born in 1948, from the village of Novye Tatyshly in Tatyshlinsky district and others. Nazip Sadriev, well-known *vösjas'* in the Tatyshlinsky district of the Republic of Bashkortostan, stands out from the noted persons for his ascetic activities. According to him, since childhood he had attended village prayers since childhood. At a more mature age, he began to observe the actions of the priests and to listen to the prayers. He began his career as a minister of worship, first as an assistant priest, and then as the chief priest, in 1954, aged 24. Over the next sixty years, he organized the annual village (*gurt vös'*), inter-village (*kuin gurt vös'*) and district (summer and winter *mör vös'*) sacrifices. At the request of fellow villagers and residents of the district, Sadriev also conducted religious rituals of the family and ancestral circle (at weddings, the send-offs of conscripts to the army, namings, house-warmings, etc.). In the 1990s, he was often invited to other Udmurt settlements in Bashkortostan as a consultant in the revival of public prayers (Sadikov & Danilko 2005: 232].³

The vigorous resumption of public prayers in almost every settlement of the Trans-Kama Udmurts meant the problem of choosing new priests became acute, since the traditions of priestly succession had already been broken. There were no uniform principles in dealing with this problem - in each locality, this issue was resolved in a different way. The main criterion for choosing a position of *vösjas'* was the presence of positive moral qualities in the applicant. He had to be an authoritative and respected man in rural society, preferably married, without any bad habits, and someone who respected cleanliness. In some cases, an important criterion for the selection of new priests was their belonging to the "family of *vösjas'*", i.e. the presence of cult ministers in their family in the past. The method of approval for the position of a priest differed widely - they might be chosen, appointed, or be self-starters. Some specific examples now follow.

In 2012 in the village of Malaya Balzuga, in the Tatyshli district, an elderly priest Nazip Sadriev appointed a young man in his stead, namely, Fridman Kabipyaynov, born in 1978, a married music teacher. As he was at that time not yet forty years old, i.e. he had not achieved the minimum age that, according to older informants, a person must pass to become a priest. Apparently, the choice of the old priest was because the candidate had good organisational skills, a fine musical voice and was distinguished by his decent behaviour. He learnt priestly skills while conducting prayers, and the order and correctness of rituals was taught to him by the assistants of the priest (*pöras*) Fizelkhan Mukhametzyanov and Alexandr Minnigaraev, who

served in this capacity even under the old *vösjas'*. Nazip Sadriev, despite his advanced age, also attends village prayers and monitors the correctness of its conduct. At the district prayers, F. Kabipyaynov performed ritual actions for older 'colleagues'. The prayer he uttered at praying rituals is recorded from the words of a previous priest.

In the village of Novye Tatyshly, in the Tatyshlinsky district, one of the *vösjas'* is Rais Rafikov, born in 1948, now a pensioner, formerly a mechanic, whose father was a priest. Since childhood, he and his father attended various sacrifices, participated in private prayers, learned all the ritual actions well and learned his father's prayer. He began his priestly career around 1992 at the request of N. Sadriev. Rafikov is the senior priest at the district prayers *mör vös'* of the Tatyshli Udmurts on the right bank of the river Yug, held in summer and winter in the village of Novye Tatyshly. The second priest⁴ until 2017 was Salim Shakirov, born in 1938, retired, former clerk, who was appointed a priest on the advice of R.B. Galyamshin, head of the Udmurt National Cultural Centre of the Republic of Bashkortostan. He did not come from a family of priests, but had organisational skills and held authority among his fellow villagers. The two priests very harmoniously divided their duties among themselves: the first dealt mainly with the ritual side, the second was responsible for financial and organizational issues: collecting money and cereals, buying sheep, etc. After the death of S. Shakirov, Zinnat Dautov, born in 1957, a retired mechanic and driver on a collective farm, became a priest at the request of R. Rafikov. Before that, he was an assistant to the priests.

In the village of Aribash, Tatyshlinsky district, Alexey Garaev, born in 1947, a pensioner, a former teacher, who then became a priest, was the initiator of the revival of public prayer. Besides him, there are two more ministers of worship, i.e. altogether there are three, according to the number of tribal groups (*poska, chud'ja, tuklja*), living in the village. As a village prayer, *keremet vös'* was revived here, the traditions of which are followed to this day: only men participate, though elderly women server as assistants. At the event, sheep are sacrificed, and they pray with *kuarnjan'* (unleavened cakes).

Yevgeny Abdullin, born in 1965, an accountant at a local agricultural enterprise, serves as a priest in the village of Nizhnebaltachevo, Tatyshlinsky district. Due to his excellent priestly skills, he is the 'senior' among other priests of the Udmurt villages of the district living on the left bank of the river Yug and conducting joint district prayers: summer and winter *mör vös'* and *bagysh vös'* prayers. Before the priestly ministry, he was an assistant, and had received knowledge from the previous priest.

The Udmurts of the Tatyshli district also retain the ancestral principle of choosing priests. Here, descendants of former priests sometimes become *vösjas'*, although they may have little continuity of priestly knowledge, i.e. they did not or could not adopt the experience of their priestly ancestors. For example, in in the villages of Kyzlylyar and Verkhnebaltachevo brothers Boris and Vladik Khazimardanov are *vösjas'* – they are the grandchildren, albeit through the female line, of a priest from the village of Nizhnebaltachevo, Islam Armanshin.

In the village of Altaevo, in the Buraevsky district of the Republic of Bashkortostan, the current *badžym vösjas'* is Anatoly Galikhanov, born in 1962, a former teacher, was elected to a position at a village meeting in 2004. He was chosen due to his authority

among the local population and high moral qualities. He is one of the active religious figures of the Trans-Kama Udmurts, one of the initiators of the revival of their main prayer *elen vös'*, and he has created a website dedicated to the traditional religion of the Udmurts. Before him, Sharafgali Yalalov, born in 1928, a retired paramedic, who is something of a local historian, served as priest. In the 1990s, on his own initiative, he revived the decayed tradition of holding an annual communal village prayer. He was chosen as a priest at a meeting of the old-timers of the village.

In 2014, sacrifices were resumed in the village of Kasiyarovo in the Buraevsky district, where the initiator was Ramai Nigamatshin. He was born in 1939 and is now a pensioner, having been a mechanic, and is a respected person in the village. The previous priest T. Nuriev addressed him with a request to continue his work before his death, and he duly became the *kurisykis'*. But it was only after a long time that this request was fulfilled. In 2017, after the death of the new *vösjas'*, the religious functions of the village society were entrusted to Reval Farkhutdinov, born in 1959, who is distinguished by his calm character and absence of bad habits.

In the village of Asavka in the Baltachevsky district, Vladimir Galiev, born in 1971, began his ministry as a priest in 2016. A former priest, Galiakhmet Miniakhmetov, born in 1941, decided to leave this position due to old age. He and his assistants, elderly people, decided to transfer the position to the young ones. For this purpose, they went around the village, asking who would agree to become the new priest. V. Galiev expressed his consent, and for a year he participated in sacrifices as an assistant, where he was taught priestly knowledge.

If at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century, we may note a revival of the institution of priests of public village prayer-men, but should also state that the other categories of priests, the keepers of the sacred grove and the sanctuary of *kuala*, have practically ceased to exist. Only a few villages still hold prayers and sacrifices related to *lud/keremet* and *kuala*. In the village of Altaevo in the Buraevsky district, representatives of the Kaksia clan annually arrange a *kuala kuris'kon* ('prayer in the kuala') in the spring and autumn at the site of their former sanctuary. The *kuris'kis* Galiakhmat Khaziakhmatov, born in 1936, began participating in the ceremony in 1958, after returning from military service. At that time, the ceremony was led by his brother Fazli, who became a worshipper in *kuala* in 1948, after the death of his father Haziakhmet. Due to his advanced age, the priest wants to stop holding prayers in *kuala*, but there is no one to continue his work – his son lives in the city, there are also no men left in the family who want to do this in the village. In the village of Votskaya Oshya of the Yanaulsky district, the priest of the fenced sacred grove, or *lud*, is Rafik Kisametov, born in 1973. Since 1995 he has been conducting the annual summer and autumn sacrifices of the *lude pyron* ('entry into the lud'). Priestly knowledge was passed on to him by his maternal grandfather, Sadretdin Ibrayev. The priest of Lud is not related to the village prayers held once a year, where Arkady Urakbayev, born in 1949, is the *vösjas'*. Sacrifices in the groves of *keremet* are also carried out in the villages of Kizganbashevo of Baltachevsky and Aribash of Tatyshlinsky districts.

Currently, among the ministers of worship, new categories of persons can be identified, which, according to sources, did not exist in the past. Firstly, this is *vös'*

kuzë ('the master of prayer'), who deals with all financial and organizational issues of conducting sacrifices. In the village of Novye Tatyshly in the Tatyshli district, the *vös' kuzë* was considered to be S. Shakirov, who was also a *vös'jas'*. In the 1990s, Rafik Khamidullin, the former chairman of the collective farm, one of the village activists, performed the functions of the prayer master.

Garifulla Garifanov, a resident of Nizhnebaltachevo village, born in 1947, retired, former chairman of the village Council, is a member of the left-bank group of Tatyshlinsky Udmurts. At the request of the residents, he deals with the organization of the district prayers of *bagöz vös'* and *mör vös'*, in his village – the village *gurten vös'*. He is responsible for collecting money and buying sacrificial animals. Having authority among the priests, he skilfully organizes their activities, although he does not perform any ritual functions himself. If necessary, he "appoints" new priests. There are also *vös' kuzë* in some other localities where they serve the holding of village prayers.

All in all, it can be considered that the appearance of the *vös' kuzë* in Tatyshlinsky Udmurts is a later phenomenon, and it was due to the process of revitalization. If in the old days the priests themselves dealt with both financial and organizational issues, at present, when a revival of religious traditions occurs, some charismatic leaders, being at the head of the movement for the revival of religious traditions, do not become priests themselves. In this case, with their consent, the priests are persons whose main advantage is regarded as their "priestly" origin. In those places where the priests themselves have good organizational qualities, as a rule, there are no *vös' kuzë* anymore.

Another category of persons associated with the cult is *vös' korka utis'*, the 'keeper of the house of worship'. For example, in Novye Tatyshly, Habrislam Habibyanov (born in 1939), whose estate is located next to the sanctuary. His duties include looking after the territory of the sanctuary and the prayer house itself, the keys to which are in his possession. He keeps cauldrons and other ritual accessories, valuable in material terms, at home.

Back in 2012, there was an attempt to organize an association of priests of the traditional religion of the Eastern (Trans-Kama) Udmurts, initiated by the *vös'jas'* from the village of Altaevo, A. Galikhanov. On January 25, 2019, at the suggestion of the Chairman of the National Cultural Centre of the Udmurts of the Republic of Bashkortostan, Salimyan Garifullin, a "Meeting of worshippers of the traditional religion of the Trans-Kama Udmurts" was held in the village of Novye Tatyshly in the Tatyshli district. The Udmurt priests from Bashkortostan and Perm District who gathered at the event discussed the most pressing issues of their activities and chose the organizing committee for the creation of the "Religious Council" – *Vös' kenesh* association (Baidullina 2019). Thus, village priests play a significant role in the spiritual life of the Trans-Kama Udmurts, being the keepers of cultural heritage. Since the 1990s, significant changes have taken place in the organization of their activities dictated by modern realities of life.



1. Priest vös'ias'kis' Nazip Sadriev from Malaya Balzuga village, Tatyshlinsky district of the Republic of Bashkortostan, 2017. Photo by Ranus Sadikov.



2. Khabrislam Khabibyanov (the custodian of the house of prayer vös' korka utis') and Rais Rafkov (vös'ias'kis') from Novoe Tatyshly, Tatyshlinsky district of the Republic of Bashkortostan, 2018. Photo by Ranus Sadikov.



3. Priests at the elen vös' prayer (on the right: Nazip Sadriev, in the center is a priest from the village of Altaevo, Buraevsky district, Anatoly Galikhanov), Kirga village, Kuedinsky district, Perm region, 2010. From the photo archive of A. Galikhanov.



4. Priest vös'ias'kis' Evgeniy Adullin from the Nizhnebaltachevo, Alga village, Tatyshlinsky district of the Republic of Bashkortostan, 2013. Photo by Ranus Sadikov.



5. Meeting of worshippers of the traditional religion of the Zakamsk Udmurts. 25 January 2019. Novye Tatyshly village, Tatyshly district, Republic of Bashkortostan. Photo by Anna Baidullina.

NOTES

¹ The main sources in the writing of this article were the author's field materials, collected during joint expeditions of the R. G. Kuzeev Institute of Ethnological Research of the UFIC RAS (Ufa) and the University of Tartu (Estonia) between 2013 and 2018.

² Probably the youngest, because according to the 'custom of the minority', common among the Trans-Kama Udmurts, it was the youngest who inherited the farm, in this case, and the ancestral *kuala*.

³ In 2016, N. Sadriev was awarded the prize of the Kindred Peoples Program "Tree of the World" (Estonia) for his long-term activities to preserve and revive the religious traditions of the Eastern Udmurts.

⁴ Since Novye Tatyshly is a large settlement, there were traditionally two senior priests here.

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