

Vernacular Beliefs and Official Traditional Religion

The position and meaning of the Mari worldview in the current context

Vernacular religion connected with the clan was expected to adapt in the context of globalisation and the vanishing ideals of traditional (tribal) societies. But at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries a revival of European 'paganism' has appeared (Koskello 2009: 295). Svetlana Chervonnaya suggests that a return to vernacular beliefs is not only happening in the mass religious mind of some Eastern European and Asian people, but also in the romantic mythologemes which are being created by national elites. Lithuanians, who were Christianised in the fourteenth century – the last nation in the Baltic region to undergo this process – recall their heathen roots; Ukrainians revive their *rodnoverie* – indigenous beliefs – in an attempt to resist the Orthodox and Catholic Churches (Chervonnaya 1998: 200). Apart from this there are other pre-Christian faith organisations in Latvia, Estonia, Germany and England (Koskello 2009: 297). The traditions of the pre-Christian societies attract people through their apparent proximity to communal peasant culture. Followers of some of these beliefs are interested in popularising Viking mythology. The activities of druids and adherents of the Northern European Asatru religion revive ancient festivals and ceremonies (Smorszhevskaya and Shiszhenkii 2010: 5). The popularisation of these movements can be seen as an attempt to resist an encroachment of the modern, globalised, urbane society.

IN PROVINCES OF EUROPEAN RUSSIA the tradition of local vernacular belief is based on preserved folk practices. The religious practices of the indigenous Finno-Ugric peoples living in the Russian north and the Urals are often thought of as a post-Soviet Russian means of ethnic mobilisation (Chervonnaya 1998, Leete and Shabayev 2010, Luehrmann 2011).

Ethnographers also notice that 'ethnic' religions and faith traditions, as forms of worldviews, reside deep within the structures of culture and have an effect upon these structures. The period of state-sponsored atheism did not entirely uproot forms of religious thought or rituals associated with Russia's ethnic minorities (Siikala and Ulyashev 2012: 312). Even in the context of the ideological dominance of Islam in some regions, clusters of Muslim-heathen 'double beliefs'¹ (*dvoeverie* in Russian), or an explicit return to archaic beliefs, are emerging (Shnirelman 2008: 1187). Among groups whose vernacular belief traditions are a basis for cultural identity are the Adygs, the Bashkirs and others (Chervonnaya 1998: 200). The cult of Tengry – the pre-Islamic religion of the Turkic tribes – is undergoing a revival among the Tatars.

Spiritual tradition in the history of Mari folk culture

According to Anastasiya Koskello's categorisation, presented in the article 'Contemporary pagan religions of Eurasia: the borders of globalization and antiglobalization' (2009), Mari vernacular beliefs can be referred to as a conservative type. The religious

1 'Double belief' here refers to a syncretism of vernacular and official local religions. Adherents can follow parts of both religious norms and combine their customs. The term 'double belief' used in the current paper appropriates one of the Don Yoder's definitions of 'folk-religion': in the context of the Caribbean and Latin America the mixture of the 'high' (Catholic) religion with native religious traditions. This is a syncretic approach assigned from acculturation theory (Yoder 1974: 14–15).

tradition of the Mari people² is based on polytheistic traditions of nature worship and ancestor cults known as Chimarij³ customs (*Chimarij jüla* in Mari). Mari traditional beliefs are based on nature worship, are closely related to people's worldviews and lifestyles, and are considered to be one of the most important connecting factors in preserving national self-consciousness and identity. A spiritual life interwoven with a traditional worldview encourages national unity amongst the Mari, who lack their own state (Bakhtin 2012). From ancient times, the multinational territory of the Volga basin was 'a part of the world where religion has long served as a marker of communal identification' (Luehrmann 2011: 42). The dispersion of Mari tribes across an area of Islamic and Christian culture, as well as religious persecution, made it difficult to preserve the ancient Chimarij customs and philosophy in a pure form. However, the Mari ethnic worldview was developed and preserved in the tradition of spiritual cults, although with small differences in the details and meanings of ceremonies. Thus, we can talk about the process of reviving existing traditions with, in some cases, additional elements, rather than complete reconstructions.

The philosophical aspects and rituals of the Mari religious traditions of today are being investigated by folklorists, anthropologists and historians. Lidiya Toidybekova has collected local variations of ceremonies and narratives about the religious customs of the Mari. A large amount of data from expeditions was published in her monograph 'Mari Vernacular Belief and Ethnic Self-consciousness' (Tojdybekova 1997) as well as in 'The Dictionary of Mari Myth-

ology' in 2007. Galina Shkalina writes about the spiritual and philosophical aspects of Mari vernacular beliefs and their connection with Mari traditional culture. The history of reviving Mari religious ceremonies in the territory of Mari El (the 'land of the Mari') and neighbouring regions has been explored by the ethnographer Nikandr Popov. Scholars of the regional and central research institutes completed complex research into religious minorities of the Volga river basin and the Urals in between 2006 and 2010 (Yagafova *et al.* 2010). Boris Knorre investigated the interaction between religious movements and national politics in the Mari El Republic. A review of the religious situation in the region, which compared the region with the religious developments in contemporary Russia, was presented in the volume *The Religious Atlas of Contemporary Religious Life in Russia* (Burdo and Filatov 2006). One of the most recent studies devoted to the religious question in the Republic of Mari El during the post-Soviet period was made by German anthropologist Sonja Luehrmann (2011). Analysis of the increasing popularisation of Mari vernacular cults is presented here in comparison with other religious movements active during this period of religious renaissance.

The extent to which traditions are maintained depends on how well unified customs comply with ethnic traditions. In the current paper the example of the maintenance of Mari vernacular beliefs and the contemporary development of traditions are explored. Local rituals in different parts of the Mari El Republic and border regions will be observed. Attention will be paid to the development of a traditional religion and the modification of its role in the context of life in a modern social context.

Considering the current situation of the Mari folk religion, it is possible to see two tendencies occurring within the context of its development. A process of the formation (or creation) of an official system of ethnic religion, based on local vernacular belief traditions over the last two decades can be observed in Mari El, so that the Mari ethnic belief system has developed both at the vernacular and institutional levels.

Vernacular religiosity is manifested through spontaneous or village-level traditions of nature and ancestor worship. Seasonal prayers are closely connected with the rural way of life; ceremonies of collective nature worship are led by local elders – *karts*. *Karts* follow local traditions of vernacular belief and local people are proficient in the customs of preparing and carrying out the prayer meetings. In each

- 2 The Mari people (the old ethnonym is *Cheremis*) are one of the indigenous minorities of the central region of European Russia. They belong to the Finno-Ugric family. According to the Russian Federation census of 2010 the Mari population amounts to 547,605 people. About half of the Mari live in the Republic of Mari El, the capital of which is Yoshkar-Ola. A large proportion of the Mari population lives in the Bashkortostan republic; in addition, there are Mari villages in neighbouring regions in the territory of the Volga basin and the Ural Mountains. Today there are friendly associations of Mari people in Kazan, Moscow and Saint Petersburg.
- 3 Literally, 'pure Mari', a term denoting unbaptised adherents of Mari vernacular beliefs, people practising traditional sacrificial rituals. When speaking Russian, most use the term *jazychestvo* (paganism) (Luehrmann 2011: 225, 230).

Mari region traditional ceremonies are preserved to various extents and customs vary from one group to another, with the specific features of local customs being preserved.

Another way in which the Mari religion has developed is in the creation of a hierarchical structure of priests (*karts*), manifested in the legal registration of the Mari religion as an organisation under the name 'Oshmarij-Chimarij' in Moscow in 1991. Since that time, the Mari religion has had official status in Mari El which is equal to that of Islam and Russian Orthodoxy. From the 2000s there has been quite a strong *kart* structure, a feature which is not characteristic of traditional Mari vernacular belief.

I will observe the process of the development of Mari vernacular beliefs in the post-Soviet period and characterise the main points of the two levels of ethnic religion. To make clear the usage of appropriate terminology in the traditions referred to, the vernacular level will be called Chimarij. This term is used by the researcher Sonja Luehrmann (2011) when referring to the Mari vernacular religion in the context of contemporary religious movements in the Republic of Mari El. I assume that this word is suitable to refer to contemporary Mari vernacular belief (*Mari jüla* in Mari), although in the Mari language its meaning is much narrower because it mainly refers to unbaptised followers of the Mari vernacular tradition. In the current paper the word 'Chimarij' does not encompass only the belief traditions of the 'pure Mari' and un-Christianised followers of *Mari jüla*, but the appearance of more private, spontaneous and local sacrifice ceremonies within Mari vernacular belief, without advertisement or institutional endorsement. The official form of the Mari religion will be referred to as the Mari Traditional Religion (MTR), according to the Russian version of the name for the contemporary Mari vernacular religious organisation. I think that these two aspects of the ethnic belief tradition could be combined strongly in future. However, in the present situation they are differentiated and, perhaps, will exist for some time in parallel. It is important to notice that we observe two aspects of the same religious movement. Therefore, both versions of the Mari religious movement may express the same concepts and terminology appropriate to the religious system and rituals of Mari vernacular spirituality.

It is commonly assumed that the majority of unbaptised Mari live in Bashkortostan, their Chimarij belief traditions having developed in contact with Islam and later Lutheranism. In my analysis I do not

use available data from Bashkortostan when structuring the Mari religion in Mari El.

The religious status of Mari vernacular customs Mari jüla

Religion was officially marginalised in Soviet Russia. The situation with respect to religious issues changed when a law on religious freedom was passed in 1991 following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Resolution no. 268-1). Orthodox and Islamic religious institutions then became very active. Many different religious movements from abroad also appeared in Russia at the beginning of the 1990s. The common prayer services of vernacular religion during the difficult period after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, on the one hand can be considered as a religious necessity for the people. On the other hand, they were supportive of the national revival movement for national intelligence. People used the opportunity to revive the tradition of common prayers that previously could only be practised secretly in villages. This movement was supported by the national leaders as a part of the revival of Mari culture.

The first Mari president of the Mari Republic, Vladislav Zotin, was elected in 1991. It is necessary to mention Zotin's initiative in creating the Orthodox Diocese of Yoshkar-Ola in 1993 – the Mari Republic had previously belonged to the diocese of Kazan (in the Republic of Tatarstan). The second president of Mari El, Vyacheslav Kislitsyn, was ethnically Russian but considered a local. He maintained the orientation of previous national policy and even participated in prayer services, causing exasperation among Orthodox leaders in Mari El (Burdo and Filatov 2006: 235–7).

The religious organisation of adherents to the Mari Oshmarij-Chimarij (literally: 'White Mari-Clean Mari') folk religion was registered in Moscow in 1991. The leader of this organisation was the Mari writer Alexander Juzykain, a man with a reputation as a former leading *kart*. Being, together with local initiators, the organiser of prayer services, he always gave local priests the right to carry out worship ceremonies according to their local traditions.

The new official traditional religion was based on traditions that were preserved in 'the least Christianised' districts of the north eastern region of the republic. In southern areas of Mari El, close to the Volga River and big cities such as Kazan (Tatarstan) and Cheboksary (Chuvashiya), the Orthodox religion amalgamated with the vernacular, animist

worldview; syncretic, Orthodox-vernacular double faith⁴ traditions may be observed here. People go to churches and sacred groves, and pray to trees which often represent gods who are bearing the names of Orthodox saints. Small icons are placed both in “God’s corners” in houses and at holy places (trees, hills, groves, altar-chapels). The analysis of material collected during fieldwork shows that for the most part, double belief traditions have some outwardly Christian attributes, although this is not reflected in the spiritual concepts. The Mari engagement with Christianity is superficial; demonstrated predominantly through icons and rare visits to church (Yagafova *et al.* 2010: 61–9).

Traditionally, Mari vernacular belief communities did not have the hierarchical structure of attendants. The temporary structure of the *karts* was formed during community and all-Mari prayer services. A respected local elder was elected as the main priest, and he was responsible for carrying out general prayer according to the traditions of a given area. In 1998 during a gathering of priests from the Oshmarij-Chimarij organisation, Alexander Tanygin was elected to be one of the main priests, and at present he is the official leader of the Mari religion.

In 2001 Leonid Markelov⁵ was elected to the Republic’s government as the country’s third president. The new government’s policies did not correspond with the work direction of local intelligence, and the direction of development of the ethnic religion changed at the official level.

At the beginning of the 2000s, an official organisation – the Mari Traditional Religion (MTR) – was established. It is considered to be the successor of

the previous organisation, although there were some reasons for the creation of this new organisational structure. This was connected both with the death (after a serious illness) of Alexander Juzykain and the necessity to reregister the Oshmarij-Chimarij organisation as a result of governmental changes in Mari El when Markelov came to power. On the one hand, the chief priest, Alexander Tanygin, was included in the membership of the council for the coordination of religious organisations, along with the representatives of Russian Orthodoxy and Islam. The centralised organisation of the MTR, which unites Mari priests (*karts*) and local vernacular belief communities, was formed instead of Oshmarij-Chimarij. On the other hand, social organisations and movements dealing with issues of national revival went through a difficult period. The attempts of national movement leaders to place Mari national culture in a privileged position were not supported by the government of Mari El (Knorre and Konstantinova 2010; Luehrmann 2011: 122–5). Thus, the conception of Mari ethnic religion was modified.

A popularisation of the official Mari ethnic religion was initiated by activists from the ethnic movement of the Republic of Mari El. Local religious communities in different districts of the republic were formed under the umbrella of the official MTR organisation. There are four regional vernacular belief communities which have legal status; others carry out the activities without registration according to Federal Law no. 125-F3 (Blagovest-info 2003). In this way the connections between priests in different parts of Mari El and neighbouring regions (Nizhegorodsky, the Kirov regions and the Tatarstan Republic) were formed. *Karts* coordinate to conduct religious ceremonies in the countryside and guide common worship. Here a tendency towards a streamlining, unification and simplification of diverse local customs begins. The leaders of the organisation attempt to develop a common concept of the vernacular religion; the image of modern ‘traditional’ beliefs is formed by interviews in the media, appearances by the chief *kart*, and in publications (e.g., Glushkova 2008, Popov, Y. 2009, Tanygin 2012 and 2013, Bobkova 2013).

The horizontal division in Mari vernacular belief was fixed by the size of the prayer meetings: from the smallest family worship to the most significant, the ‘world’ prayer. The creation of a vertical structure among religious leaders makes the MTR similar to religious institutions of other official confessions. In this case, it is possible to enlist future *karts* and

4 The term ‘double faith’ (‘double belief’) is used when referring to Russian dvoeverie to refer to Mari vernacular rituals with outwardly Christian attributes. The word is used in spite of quite strong arguments from Chris J. Chulos about the uncertainty of the term and his suggestions not to use the term *dvoeverie* when referring to peasant religiosity in Russian culture (Chulos 2000: 191). I suppose that the phenomenon of syncretism among ethnic belief traditions which display outward elements of Christian Orthodoxy can be described as dual faith in contemporary Chuvash, Udmurt, and Mari religious cultures in Russia (Yagafova *et al.* 2010: 61).

5 Leonid Markelov is originally from Moscow and came to Mari El during his military service. According to his biography his political career has not been uncontroversial. However, the third period of his presidency now draws to an end.

teach them the unified rules of the sacrificial rites. Describing the didactic approaches to religious revival in post-Soviet Russia, Sonja Luehrmann assumes that the Mari religious organisation's 'attempts to gain the status of a denomination through networks of teaching and learning show the enduring appeal of the model for building institutions from scratch' (Luehrmann 2011: 127). *Karts* who belong to the organisation help by reintroducing seasonal prayers in different places; they take part in acts of worship together with local elders or lead the prayers when there is a lack of local inhabitants who know the rituals. This leads to emerging changes in local traditions and, to some extent, unifications of the order of religious services. However, there are local communities where older inhabitants continue to lead local worship without any connection to the central MTR organisation. The official and vernacular levels of Mari ethnic belief co-exist and interact at the level of these public prayer meetings in sacred groves.



People near one of the sacral trees during the Sürem prayer in Shorynza, Morki district, 2012.

Local traditions of Mari worship

Community acts of worship involving a preliminary oath

One of the local tradition rites is the preliminary prayer, *Vuchyktymash kumaltysh* (*vuchyktash* means 'to make somebody wait for someone' in Mari), enacted in Shorun'zha village (in the Morki district). Although the time of the worship concurs with the *Agavajrem* festival, which is connected with the completion of work in the fields, the earlier form of worship is different. There is no sacrifice of animals during the spring season festival. Ritual bread, other traditional flour products, curd pancakes, eggs and kvass are placed in front of the sacred tree in a grove. Customarily there were organised games for youths after the *Agavajrem* worship and these traditions have been retained in some places.

The worship involving a preliminary oath, *Vuchyktymash kumaltysh*, was held in 1998 at Sürem grove in the Morki district during the spring (*Mikolo*) holiday on May 22nd. The ritual was devoted to three gods: the *Kugu Serlagysh* (the 'Great Guardian'), *Shochyn Ava* (the divinity of birth), and

Mikolo Jumo (Saint Nicholas; Nikolay Chudotvorent in the Russian Orthodox pantheon). The prayer takes the form of 'a ritual promise to the gods about an impending offering'. Two ducks and a white sheep were to be 'given to the gods'; each sacrifice was intended for different divinities. During the same summer, at the *Vuchyktymash kumaltysh*, the promised offering was made in the *Sürem kumaltysh*, the same grove as the Sürem prayers (Popov, N. 2002: 114). Usually, in other places, Sürem worship is held in the middle of summer and often on the same date – 12 July 12th, which is connected with the influence of Christianity (July 12th is the day of St Peter and Paul). One of the gods to whom the worship is dedicated on that day is *Küdörchö Jumo* (the god of thunder), or in some places, *Petro Jumo* ('God Peter'), who is associated with the god of thunder. The worship ceremony takes place in the sacred grove devoted to summer sacrifice.

As the preliminary ceremonies involve undertaking to make a sacrificial offering after some time, the participants in the Sürem ceremony should be the same. However, a large number of new visitors attending the worship ritual in Morki district reveals the alteration of the purpose of summer prayer as an extension of the spring festival. Natives show hospitality, they respect the interest of observers, but they are not always satisfied with the large numbers of 'guests'. According to their point of view, in the vicinity of all Mari villages there are places of nature worship and people should pray in their own local sacred groves. As they said in the interview: 'Do the gods of our place know them and their needs?' Sometimes they speak of a 'carrying off' of 'the requests' to

other places, for example if there is a drought, which usually comes after summer worship (interviews with locals made during preparations for the 'holiday', FM Morki 2012).

Local people also say that it is not necessary to participate in common acts of worship every year – 'how do I upset the gods every year?' (interview with inhabitants in Shorun'zha, FM Morki 2012). It is enough to take part in prayers and turn to the gods with gratitude and requests for the wellbeing of the family. They go to the grove with living offerings after or before important events in family or personal life. Most often they 'give' ducks or geese. It is important to note that some people do not go to the sacred groves as they consider themselves either to be baptised or non-religious, although they still know the local customs of prayer rituals.

Individual worships involving a preliminary oath

The tradition of a preliminary promise to make a sacrifice exists in the tradition of Akpatyr worship. The place of worship – Akpatyr's grave – is not far from the Bolshoi Kityak village in the Kirov region, close to the border of Mari El. This ritual is related to basic folk beliefs and is considered to be one of the most sacred and intimate. Family prayers or personal worship occur in the sacred place in the autumn, during the period from the middle of October to the second half of December. During this period those who wish to hold a family or private service, go to the sacred place and prepare ritual porridge with the meat of the sacrificed animal. During the ritual people ask the presiding hero for wellbeing, health and strength for their family. At the same time, private requests can be made at all seasons, whenever the need arises.

For this purpose a person goes to the sacred tree near Akpatyr's grave, lights a candle and prays to the sacred hero, making a promise to bring an offering if the request is answered by Akpatyr. The worshippers fulfil a promise made in autumn, 'after the first snow', usually bringing headscarves or towels as offerings, or sacrificing the animal they have promised – a duck, goose, sheep or ram (interviews with locals in Bolshoi Kityak, FM-2012).

Village prayers

Seasonal prayers, held in the countryside and led by local elders, are closer to the spiritual traditions of rural life. The prayers can be held by one settlement (village prayer) or several villages (community prayer). Large-scale worship takes the form of public prayers, or 'global' (i.e. all-Mari) prayers involving collaboration with the central MTR organisation. The functions of the sacred places are also different, depending on the type of prayer. This depends on the category of family, kin, community and 'world' groves. The sites for rain inducing rituals in times of drought are found in the lowlands, close to water springs (bogs, lakes or small rivers). According to fieldwork observations, a similar landscape is typical for the sacred places where people pray to rid themselves of disease.

We will give an overview of the village autumn prayer service that was held in the Paran'ga district in Mari El. It was organised by local elders in collaboration with village inhabitants. They set the date and began preparations for the worship. The order of preparation is the same for all prayers. It involves gathering money in the village to buy animals for sacrifice, preparing the place in the sacred grove, cutting the grass if the ceremony

is organised in the summer, preparing firewood, and so on. Housewives clean their homes, heat the sauna, and cook the traditional dish the day before the date of worship. Prayers start early in the morning and last until the afternoon. Men sacrifice animals and prepare to offer meat and porridge under the leadership of local elders. Priests decide beforehand who prays to which god, as there are three sacred trees dedicated to three gods in this grove. Meat is cooked on three



Tatiana Alybina

The sacral birch on the Akpatyr's grave with offered gifts on it, 2012.

fires dedicated to each of these three gods. Women and children come later and put traditional flour products on the *shage*, a wooden table covered by fir twigs (Pen'kova *et al.* 2009: 14–15). The prayer rituals end with a traditional meal of food prepared on the fire during the ritual.

It is a fact that not everybody takes part in collective worship during this settlement prayer meeting. In some families, people prefer to hold the prayer meeting at home on the same day. Apparently, this means that some people do not share money and products with villagers for general prayer, but confine the sacrificial ritual to their family group.

An example of 'transferring' village prayer meetings to homes was identified during an expedition in the Sernur district of Mari El. Local inhabitants said that they had changed the prayer meeting into a home service and continue to hold it every year, although separately in their houses. The reason for this was the inconvenience of going up and down the hills with dishes and the many other necessary items, as well as preparing water during the ritual. Therefore, it was more comfortable to arrange the offering at home. At the same time, some people continue to sacrifice at the old places – the sacred grove at the foot of the hill; others have given up the worship tradition altogether (interview with locals, FM 2013). It is possible to suppose that transferring prayer into the territory of the home could be connected with the suppression of religious rituals during the period of persecution, with the same concerning night prayers. This would indicate the continuous existence of a popular religious consciousness and the important role of prayer customs in local inhabitants' lives.

Night prayers

The origins of night prayers can be related to the persecution of the Mari animist religion, initially by the Russian Orthodox Church and later by the state. The majority of the preparations for worship are carried out at night. Animals are sacrificed in the evening and meat is boiled in coppers until early morning (so that the smoke above the sacred grove is not visible far away). Night-time was appropriate for prayers because of the strict schedule of *kolkhoz* work – suspicions about those holding or participating in worship could produce undesirable results. In the midst of harsh, anti-religious propaganda, only older family members took part in prayers. Grandmothers took their grandchildren with them, to avoid going to prayers at a distant grove alone (interviews with local people who remember visiting the groves in

childhood, FM Morki 2012). During the Soviet period people gathered for common worship in the grove early in the morning, so that an outsider would not notice the gathering.

I was lucky to observe the tradition of night prayers preserved in Malmyzh district in the Kirov region (FM Malmyzh 2013). Contemporary communal worship in the morning started not at sunrise, but around 10 a.m. when all participants gathered together in the grove. The ritual of worship started in the evening in the house of the family which provided for the sacrifice near the sacred tree dedicated to the chief god, *Osh Poro Kugu Jumo* (the 'Great Kind White God'). A pagan priest, turning to the western corner of the house, offered words of prayer over the prepared bread, pancakes and *shörva* (kvass) in the light of a homemade candle. After this, sheep assigned for sacrifice were sprinkled with water using a birch broom. According to the tradition, if the animal is fit for sacrifice, it will shake itself. Sheep, coppers and flasks with water were transported to the grove where preparation for the morning worship started.

There are seven *onapu* (sacred trees), belonging to seven gods in that grove. All of the trees are broad-leaved – birches and lindens. The *onapu* of the chief god grows in the centre of the sacred grove. During the prayer ceremony another family was making sacrifices to *Perke Jumo* (the god of prosperity). According to the opinions of my informants, if more families make offerings to different gods, separate fires are made near each sacred tree, so there can be up to seven fires during the prayer. This time the prayer gathering was not as extensive, and the sacrifices to both gods were held at the main sacred tree. However, three bonfires were set separately to prepare three sheep for sacrifice.

Family prayers

Such prayers in some groves are held by families at a time when there are no other people about. Family prayers occur in the sacred groves near the sacred family tree (if it remains), or in the place of collective worship. Only the immediate family members and their closest relatives participate. During this type of prayer gathering, sacrificial porridge is also cooked, or flour products are offered to the fire. Family worship also has variations in detail, depending on the person who leads the prayers. In earlier times a man from each family led the prayer ceremony, although today it may be an elderly woman or a local *kart* who has been invited to organise the prayer ceremony.

Family prayers in the groves can also be replaced



The place of personal (and family?) worship in the grove with felled sacral trees. Joint expedition with Mari National Museum named after T. Evseev, Zvenigovo district, republic of Mari El, 2011.

by the ritual of home worship. Often people use a small fir, with a root or spruce branch brought from the forest as a sacred tree for prayers at home. At the same time the order of the ceremony is the same. The ethnographer Nikandr Popov describes a family prayer in the following way:

Everywhere in the northeast region of the republic, family prayers began to be revived. These ceremonies are held in a house only with the participation of family members and their relatives. The preparation for the ceremony is similar to the common sacrifice. For a week before the ritual, they clean their house and wash all laundry. During the evening before the ceremony family members and the invited leader of the prayer – the *jumyntang* – wash themselves and their clothes in the sauna.

Early in the morning they put a round loaf of bread, cheese curd, and flat cakes on the table. The head of the family prepares home-made wax candles. The offering animal (a duck or a goose) is brought to the house and tied to the leg of the table. All attendants kneel and the spiritual head of the family says prayers and sprinkles water on the duck (or goose) with a bunch of silver fir twigs. If the bird stretches its wings and shakes off the water, they kill the bird and pour its blood into a vessel. Then they scald the goose, draw it and boil the bird in the

copper. When the bouillon has boiled, all the members of the family kneel and the elder pronounces prayers. After that, parts of the offering are burned in the fire. (Popov, N. 2002: 113)

If the worship is dedicated to several gods, separate offerings (of a goose, duck or cock) are made to each god (Pen'kova *et al.* 2009: 40–2). In the countryside, where traditions of home sacrifice are preserved, there are separate buildings, like second homes, called *kudo*. There is a stove with a large copper pot and the fire in the oven replaces the bonfire. At other times, food for domestic animals is prepared in this room (FM Sernur 2013). Home prayer rituals in the Mari-Tureck district culminate in the offering up of bird-bone ashes in the village sacred grove. Worshipers do not hold the ceremony in the grove, although the connection with the sacred place remains active through the offerings of the ashes.

It is reasonable to conclude that Mari beliefs and rituals are preserved only in the countryside. According to some narratives emerging from interviews I conducted, there are examples of sacrifices being offered in urban settings, but the conditions are much less convenient in urban areas. People have to bring the remains of the sacrificed animals to the village in order to throw them onto a fire or into an oven. It is taboo to throw away any part of the offering or ritual food. According to traditions, followers of Mari beliefs hold the family worship at least once in three years.

Ancestor worship

Clan relations are preserved in the Mari belief system. Mari funeral customs also include acts of worship and rites performed at home. On the 40th day following a funeral people light 45 candles for the *Surt jumo* (the guardian of the hearth), the *Kugeche jumo* (the god of Kugeche⁶), *Mlande ava* (Mother Earth) and the *Pairam jumo-shamyh* (the gods of celebrations), and three candles are rolled up into one for the dead (Pen'kova *et al.* 2009: 19). Consequently, the system of Chimarij belief still involves ancestor worship. Without following a particular doctrine the folk worldview has only been preserved in remote rural places.

6 *Kugeche* ('the Great Day') corresponds to Russian Easter.

Personal prayers

In the framework of the traditional Mari worldview, man is connected to the earlier generations through the common (native) land. Thus, today the phenomenon of undertaking a pilgrimage to sacred places in the MTR can be considered as a new element of religious consciousness, which is different from the Chimarij belief system. According to Chimarij customs people can get support in their native land and should worship the land of their ancestors. Owing to the way in which taboos function in sacred groves, many sacred places and isolated trees are still preserved in Mari territory. Despite the lack of collective prayer ceremonies in some regions, it cannot be said that traditions of mythological consciousness and nature beliefs are disappearing. In many places in the countryside the tradition of honouring the sacred places and the observance of vernacular forms of worship are hidden even from fellow villagers. People visit sacred places during some Orthodox holidays (because of syncretism in the religious calendar), or on appropriate days according to the moon when they need to do so. As was pointed out before, this branch of the Mari spiritual tradition system is known as *dvoeverie*.

There is no animal sacrifice in the personal worship tradition. People bring different kinds of traditional food, such as bread or pancakes, eggs, or something else specific according to local belief. The sacred trees near which people light the candle and turn to the higher powers can be dedicated both to Chimarij belief and to Christian saints. Often somebody brings an icon and leaves it there. It is quite common to find scraps of textile and ribbons at such places. The living tradition of personal prayer in a natural setting is the most consistent form to be found demonstrating the traditional mythological consciousness. It is not visible and not very open to 'advertisement' or academic investigation.

New prayer traditions

The sites of Mari historical events, or territories mentioned in historical legends become sacred in the framework of the MTR. New ceremonies of worship devoted to legendary heroes have been introduced, for instance, in the Urzhum district of the Kirov region and the Morki district of Mari El.

Personal prayers at Akpatyr's grave have already been mentioned above in the context of preliminary rituals and oaths. The common Akpatyr worship ceremony is different. The collective worship ritual



An example of personal prayer rituals. The couples of trees are being tied up with the request to find the lifemate or wishes of a long happy life, if new family was created. Joint expedition with Mari National Museum named after T. Evseev, Zvenigovo district, republic of Mari El, 2011.

has been organised annually since August 1998, when there was a ceremonial opening of Akpatyr's monument. One local businessman fulfilled his promise to renovate the sacred area (renewing the fence) and arranged the memorial. Every year the ceremony becomes more popular. The majority of participants and *karts* come from Mari El and neighbouring regions. For local people this ceremony constitutes a secular cultural event, since they prefer to actually worship at Akpatyr alone. Local inhabitants have an opportunity to buy books – the latest editions in the Mari language – and to choose audio and video recordings of Mari songs, concerts and performances after the prayer ceremony. (FM Malmyzh 2012)

The prayers dedicated to the hero Poltysh commenced on the hill of Poltysh, near Malmyzh town. The place is linked to historical events dating back to the sixteenth century, during the time of the Cheremiss Wars (a series of military confrontations between the Russian Empire and the Kazan Khanate).



The monument on the Akpatyr's grave. Before the ceremony of common worship, 2012.

Polysh was a Mari war leader and he was fatally wounded during a battle which took place on the hill. According to some narratives, his grave is situated somewhere nearby (Hudyakov 2010: 61–77). On the initiative of local people and some ethnic activists, a large stone was placed there to mark the place. Common worship dedicated to the memory of Polysh has been held there since 2012. Polysh is presented as the people's defender, the man who united the Mari, Udmurt, Russian and Tatar nations – all resident in this territory – during the military conflicts of the sixteenth century. The prayer ritual is organised without sacrifice or entertainment.

This stone is intended to be replaced in the future by a monument to Polysh. In this case, they plan to complete the project of disposing of the historical and ethnographic complex on the hill at Polysh, with the purpose of populating the provincial area of the Kirov region with Mari settlements which are currently detached from their cultural and linguistic contexts.

The ceremony of worshipping the ethnic hero

Onar, a character from Mari legend, has been held in Mari El for the last five years. According to Mari folklore, Onar was a giant who lived on Mari lands in the old days. The Mari vernacular region on the left bank of the Volga River is often known by the formulation 'the land of Onar'. A stone dedicated to Onar was placed near the old sacred place in the Morki region. Local people gather here annually on 26 April for *Mari taleshke keche* ('the Day of the National Hero'). The event is represented rather as a secular than a religious ceremony and it is dedicated to honouring the national heroes.

The appearance of new traditions of common worship can be rated as examples of an actualisation of the historical values and personages of the nation. At the same time, a combination of remembering historic figures by means of prayer rituals intensifies the occurrence of individual deference in the MTR. The worship of natural forces, which are marked in the Mari pantheon as *jumo* ('god'), *ava* ('mother') or *oza* ('owner', 'master'), is more frequently blending with the honouring of these 'real characters'. They are the heroes of legends, or historical figures who have risen to holy status. The tradition of worshipping ancestor-protectors is not a new phenomenon. However, their worship was connected with a definite territory of patronage and ties in with the departed forbears of the local people. More and more people from distant places are now taking part in contemporary rites, and the local ties with the land and clan of the worshipped protector are not being taken into account. Thus, the entire Mari nation is presented as the descendents of the worshipped ancestor-heroes.

The process of increasing the number of honoured holy people (*shnuj*) and religious ceremonies in the MTR can be characterised as an imitation of Russian Orthodoxy (as an official religion with global status) on the one hand, and as a response to the impact of Christianity and the propaganda of Russian Orthodoxy in modern Russian society on the other.

The idea of paying special attention to personalities – the worshipped Mari legendary heroes and contemporary MTR priests – becomes apparent in the book *Shij mundyra* ('The Silver Clew'), published under the authorship of the chief priest of the MTR, Alexander Tanygin. The first part of the book contains the history of the MTR and its ideas and religious conceptions of some spheres of social life. The largest portion of the book is devoted to characters from Mari legends and Mari events. There are also biographies of some *karts* from different districts of the Mari El Republic. 'The Silver Clew' (as well as the

book *Marij Jüla*⁷) is represented as an example of the source of the information about Mari religious traditions by respondents (priests and adherents of MTR). Thus, the conception of a religious system may be dependent on the actions of activists, represented by leaders of the religious organisation and the initiators of social structures. Hence, according to the books published by the chief *kart*, the tendency towards hero (or protector) worship becomes apparent in the newly-created ethnic belief system. The history and sacred power of heroes from Mari history and legends are being popularised by this book.

Conclusion

Rituals of vernacular belief are openly practised among the Mari. In recent years, a discussion about the possibility and necessity of finding a general form for the various local acts of worship in the Mari natural religion has been ongoing. Local inhabitants in regions where unbaptised Mari live oppose a proposed unification of customs and attempt to preserve their indigenous traditions.

With regard to the contemporary position in developing Mari vernacular beliefs, we can speak of two layers of vision existing at the same time. The officially established MTR functions as an ideological constituent in preserving national consciousness and popularising traditional culture. However, the orientation towards a unification and synthesis of the local variations is notable in the ceremonial component, as it is in the meanings of semantic significance in the ritual and spiritual aspects. Both the territorial expansion of revived traditions and the popularisation of the most common rituals in the order of prayer ceremonies must be organised by *karts* who are members of the centralised organisation of the MTR. The concept of a discrete ethnic religion and the unified interpretation of the spiritual content within the vernacular belief system is negotiated through interviews with priests and articles in the media, and through the publication of the book edited by the chief priest of the MTR organisation. Therefore, one may consider the idea that the development of an official Mari religion is inevitable in the conditions of urban society where the philosophy of the vernacular religious system cannot be led by the older generation

7 The book about ancient Mari belief rituals, *Marij jüla*, was published in 2010 under the authorship of Aleksandr Tanygin and ethnographer Nikandr Popov (2010).

of inhabitants in the countryside. The development of an ethnic religion depends increasingly on the actions of activists, represented by priests from the religious organisation as well as initiators from non-governmental organisations. At the same time, belief in holy forces is maintained in the religious consciousness of the people. The rituals of the vernacular religion take place in rural settings, while in urban life connections with an ethnic spiritual culture tend to decrease. Therefore, adapting the ethnic spiritual tradition to a globalising environment leads to a denial of the archaic elements of local rituals and a unification of vernacular religiosity, while this religiosity is used as a tool for the promotion of national identity. However, the process of a formation of an official Mari religion is not complete. The official MTR on the one hand, and vernacular religiosity on the other are extensively entangled and for many people there is actually no real difference between them. The issue needs further investigation, and the situation of Mari vernacular belief in the other regions in Russia in which Mari people live should also be researched. ■

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