

Transition Rituals in the Life of an Udmurt Girl/Maiden/Woman in the Late 19th to 20th Centuries

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“The system of customs and rituals, which in a conditional-symbolic way marks the most noteworthy events in people’s lives, constitutes an important characteristic of each ethnos, a rather stable and clearly expressed component of their culture” (Fedyanovich 1997: 3). This article gives a survey of the rituals performed in the female life cycle, of the so-called transition stages in her life. The tackling of the female topic is not incidental at all. In the traditional society of many a nation, including the Udmurts, it was namely the life of a girl/maiden/woman that was more distinctly regulated and presented in a sign-symbolical way. This was related to both the birth-giving function and the general working activities of women as well as the idea of a woman as “an unstable, periodically impure creature” (Kabakova 1999: 208).

Transition rituals, which constitute a part of the traditional family life of the Udmurts, attracted already the attention of pre-revolution scientists, and so short descriptions of the Udmurts’ customs can be found in the works of the authors from the late 19th – early 20th centuries (Buch 1882; Gavrilov 1891; Vereshchagin 1886; 1889; Munkácsi 1887; 1952; Pervukhin 1888–1890). Several rituals are also touched upon in the thematic researches from the last quarter of the 20th century, first and foremost, the ones concerned with the calendar rituals and popular education of the Udmurts (Khristolyubova 1984; 1985; Nikitina 1992; 1997), women’s folk costumes (each shift in the social status was accompanied by a change of the headgear and the whole costume) (Belitser 1951; Kosareva 2000), as well as the role and status of the woman in ancient times and in Udmurt society in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Shutova 1995; 1998; Ivshina 1999; 2002).

Purposely ousting the more sacramental transition rituals – birth, wedding and funeral (which have been treated in scientific literature quite thoroughly) – the article deals with the ones related to the age of consent

ныл курастькон (or ныл куриськон) (maidens' begging or praying), ныл брага (maiden's mash) and the ritual called сяттым (чалтым) (not translated word for word, consists in bathing in the water), which in different sources is explained differently and is mainly connected with the bride. This kind of choice of material is partly connected with the fact that the author herself has first-hand fieldwork experience of the performance of these concrete rituals.¹ In addition to fieldwork materials, the author, a bearer of Udmurt culture herself, having a command over the system of this socio-cultural communication, (here I would like to express my deep gratitude to my grandmother Fyokla Mikhailova (1910–1996), an expert in folk traditions), also refers to personal experience. The scientific side is actively supported by the information provided by the audio-visual documents from the joint expeditions of the Estonian National Museum (ENM) and the National Museum of the Udmurt Republic (NMUR), preserved in the video-archive of the ENM. The existence of the rituals related to the female growing-up cycle is dealt with by opposing history and the present time – this kind of narrative visually demonstrates the variability and vitality of the elements of the Udmurts' traditional world perception.

Rituals of the infant period

In traditional society, the “gender identification”, the symbolic connection of the child to its future actions, occurred already in the first few minutes of its life. So, in order to cut off the umbilical cord, the midwife took the baby in her arms and carried it to the sauna doorsill (borderline area!), where she chopped off the baby-boy's umbilical cord on a log with an axe, whereas, when a girl was born, the log was replaced by a spinning wheel, and instead of the axe a small knife was used (Atamanov 1985: 93). In accordance with the future working activities, also, the following actions with the umbilical cord of the baby were performed. So, according to the reminiscences of the Mazitova sisters from the village of Karamas-Pelga, Kiyasovo (rayon) district, Udmurtia, *the mother put the umbilical cord of the baby girl on the weaving loom in order for her to be quick in handiwork, and that of the baby-boy – in the cattle shed, in order for him to be successful in cattle raising. Nowadays, the umbilical cord is often left in*

¹Video-archive of the ENM – V 003–004, 1988, V 062, 1993.

*the hospital – no wonder that children often have to stay in hospital (i.e., are frequently ill).*² The Udmurts expressed their attitude towards the birth of a boy or a girl with the words “*зырись шедӧтӧм*” or “*черсӧсь шедӧтӧм*”, which meant “a ploughman has been found” and “a spinner has been found”, respectively. At the end of the 20th century, when the importance of making a difference between this kind of everyday male and female activities practically faded, people said about newborn babies “*этемы вань*”, “*эте шедӧтӧм*” (/we have an *эте*; we found an *эте*), “*дыдымы вань*”, “*дыды шедӧтӧм*” (we have a *дыды*; we found a *дыды*)³. The very fact of birth, i.e., the baby coming to the world, is, as a rule, neglected.

Distinct matrimonial strategy concerning the newborn baby girl manifests itself in the first good wishes offered to her. So, when asking for blessing from *Инмар-Кылчин* (the supreme deity of the Udmurts) to the newborn baby, equally with the wishes for longevity and “life sweet like honey”, one of the wishes is that “she would grow up and be fitted as a wife at least for a widower. This kind of good wishes to the newborn girl are expressed because her future is still unknown; maybe, even a widower does not want to marry her” (Vereshchagin 2000: 17). And in a contemporary Udmurt village, one of the very first wishes for a girl is that “she would be fitted to get out among people”, i.e., get married; for a boy it is important to “be fitted for a soldier”⁴. Probably it was for the same reasons that a baby girl was wrapped into her father’s shirt; yet, some other reasons have also been given for this kind of wrapping: “The newborn baby was wrapped by the midwife into an old shirt – the father’s shirt, if the parents wanted the next baby to be a boy” (Khristolyubova 1984: 63). At present, it is rather the practical function of this kind of wrapping that is mentioned (or making nappies from worn-out clothes – women’s shirts or men’s factory-made ones sewn according to a traditional cut) than the magic one. So, young mothers explain it with the expression “it has always been so”, and the older informants say, “Elderly people said that nappies were best to be made from linen cloth. And of course there was no money to make nappies, especially for this purpose; babies were wrapped into shirts and tied up with sleeves, so that they would not kick and get naked.

² Informant Maria Mazitova, b. 1926. Video-archive of the ENM – V 108, 1991.

³ “*эте*”, “*дыды*” - diminutives-petnames for addressing baby boys and girls [SK]

⁴ Informant Olga Mikhailova, b. 1942.

Men did not have any linen shirts at that time any more, they only had those bought at shops.”⁵

In the first years of life, ritual activities are related to the infant’s physical development and no particular sex differences are observed at their performance. So, the appearance of the first tooth is observed in a special way. According to tradition, the first person – someone from the family or relatives – who sees the infant’s first tooth cutting, has to give them something as a present. The infants get their first haircut not earlier than at the age of one year, and the hair must not be thrown away – it is wrapped into a piece of cloth and put away in a chest (Gavrilov 1891: 151)⁶, or carefully gathered and burnt in a stove. Hair is usually burnt also after the following haircuts.⁷ It is believed that if you scatter the hair, the person will lose their memory/reason. The hair is burnt also because this way bad people cannot get hold of it – (it is very easy to cast an evil eye on the child through their hair), – and also for birds not to find it or the wind not to carry it away – or else you would frequently feel dizzy or you could not find your place. When the infant loses the first milk tooth, it is pressed into bread crumbs and given to a dog with the words “*мыным андан пиньдә сёт, тыныд – сяртчы пинь*” (“give me a steel tooth, leave to yourself a turnip tooth – i.e., made of turnip”).⁸ The image of a dog, in the Udmurt worldview, is directly connected with the spirits of the ancestors, a dog is like a mediator between the living and the dead. So, even nowadays, the Udmurts throw part of the funeral feast food to dogs. If dogs show teeth to one another at that, it is considered to be a good omen – “the old ones liked the donation”.

⁵ The information was gathered by the author in the village of Staraya Monya, Malaya Purga district, Udmurtia.

⁶ The same was also said by the informant Olga Mikhailova, b. 1942.

⁷ The special attitude towards hair embedded already in childhood manifests itself also in my present everyday practice. So, if a family member’s hair is cut at home, it is always burnt in the stove (yet, would this custom be observed if there was no stove in the flat?), but if it is done at a hairdresser’s, hair as something dangerous loses its meaning, i.e., it is impersonalised; this is the kind of «existence of a migrant, who has been torn away from their own ethnos, but has not yet been able to merge into the new socium, a relic of the former traditional ethnicity» (paraphrased by the author: Rybakov 2003: 8).

⁸ According to her grandmother, the author of this article did the same with her lost tooth.

Most probably the very first mention of the real confrontation between sexes belongs to Grigory Vereshchagin⁹ – “from the time of weaning off, if it is a boy, he already sleeps with his father”. Usually the mother started to wean children off after they had cut their first teeth. This was done gradually; the mother either smeared her nipples with soot or dough, or tied her breasts with a kerchief, this way causing, in the infant, a repulsion for breasts (Vereshchagin 2000: 42–42). Sometimes the mother put, at her breast, a brush made of pig’s bristles, which was meant for carding flax, calling it a bugbear “*бокоез вань*”¹⁰ (“there is a bugbear”, “bugbear – this is how you frighten children” (Borisov 1991: 30)). The mother usually breast-fed children until the age of 1.5–2 years or even longer; – breast-feeding was considered to be a contraceptive.

Spinning as a symbol of women’s activities

Further upbringing of children is closely connected with working activities. Probably, one of the first initiation-type rituals related to girls was the one performed with their first spinning: “*When washing the first hank spun by the girl, the чалтым (чалтым кароно) has to be performed, where the girl herself also has to be present. She is lifted above an ice hole and her feet are dipped into the water. The girl’s mother bakes a round loaf of bread (кӧлмеч) and makes кумышка of average strength specially for this occasion and takes these to the place where the hank is washed. Also, a man is asked to come here, either young or old, who happens to be at the ice-hole, in order to perform the praying ceremony. After worshipping and*

⁹ The work referred to here is “*Очерки воспитания детей у вотяков*” (Survey of Educating Children at Votyaks) (Vereshchagin 2000: 14–82). V. Vanyushev (2000: 10–12) observes that a summary of this work is first given in “*Вятские губернские ведомости*” (News from Vyatka Guberniya), 1892, No. 38, and the information about this manuscript can be found in the “*История полувековой деятельности Императорского Русского географического общества. 1845–1895*” (History of Half-Century-Long Activities of the Russian Imperial Geographical Society. 1845–1895, St. Petersburg, A. Suvorin’s Printing House 1896). It can be said that this is one of the first works in Udmurt ethnology studying childhood issues. The work entitled “*Человек и его рождение у восточных финнов*” (Man and His Birth at Eastern Finns) written by Kuzebai Gerd in the early 20th century, became available to the general public after its publication in Helsinki in 1993 (Gerd 1993). Some fragmentary mentions about the rituals and upbringing of children can be found in the works of many researchers, e.g., Pervukhin 1890; Buch 1882.

¹⁰ My own mother did the same while weaning off her children.

saying prayers everyone present has a shot and a piece of bread, saying, “May she become a diligent spinner”¹¹.

The making of yarn and clothing was one of the main occupations for women and generally symbolised the female sphere of activities. The objects related to spinning – the distaff, spindle and spinning wheel – represented the fertile forces of nature, and served as the sign of wealth, fertility, and vitality. The girl, who was learning to spin, was cajoled, “If you do not learn to spin, both your front and back will be naked. If during one day you spin a ball of yarn of the size of a hen’s head, you will not be poor”. Jokes were made about girls’ work, predicting their future, “If the yarn winds to the top of the spindle, you will marry into the nearest village, if it winds to the bottom – you will marry far away. If it winds askew, the relations in the family will be strained. If the ball of yarn is wound unevenly, with knots, you will get pregnant and give birth to a bastard. You must not start spinning from the top, or you are not going to get on well with your mother-in-law” (word-for-word, you will be pulling each other’s hair). The girl’s spindle and spinning served as evaluation objects also in other nations. In the museum catalogue of the ENM, there is also a note from Karelia about the fact that “young men used to make predictions about a girl’s traits, proceeding from the roundness of her spindle. These estimates are so obscene, so indecent, that the informant [a woman, SK] refused to convey them”.¹² “Dances, dances – gets pregnant” – says an Ersa-Mordvin riddle about the spindle (Mokshin 2002: 45).

Rituals connected with coming of age

Reaching maidenhood, admittance into the corresponding youth group was observed by special ritual activities, which were largely intermingled with calendar holidays. When participating in the joint expedition of the NMUR and the ENM in 1993, the author had the possibility to watch, personally, the rituals related to coming of age performed in the village of

¹¹ Informant Yekaterina Tukayeva, b. 1934, who has described the below-mentioned prophecies related to the yarn and the girl’s future. Video archives of the ENM – V 108, 1991. Unfortunately, these kinds of Udmurt initiation rituals have practically not been recorded in ethnographic literature, therefore the fragmentary data about the ritual related to the first spinning, which were obtained from the video materials of the museum, are especially valuable, as nowadays the ritual *чалтым* (*сялтым*) is connected only with the bride, which is described further on.

¹² Information about item B 98: 6, a spindle from Karelia.

Varklet-Bodya, Agryz district, Tatarstan, and gather information from local people. Here, these rituals are included in the cycle of spring festivals called *акашка* (archaic ritual of receiving the spring, which, under the influence of the Christian calendar, coincided with Lent – *быдзыннал*).¹³ At the present time, these kinds of rituals have practically been forgotten in other places.

The maidens' ritual called *ныльёслэн курыськонзы* (maidens' praying or begging) is performed on the day of *акашка*. According to informants, the ritual was formerly performed on the Monday after Lent. As religious festivals were forbidden during the Soviet time and they had to be celebrated covertly, but all the participants attended school and were not allowed to be absent without a sound reason, *ныл курыськон* started to be celebrated on Sunday. As a rule, the participants are maidens at the age of 16–18.¹⁴ They are called *кураськисьёс* – “beggars/prayers”. The ritual starts early in the morning, as they have to make a round of all houses. Maidens, in festive folk costumes (on this occasion, for the first time in their lives, put on their festive attire with a sleeveless coat *буртчин дись* made of woollen cloth or velvet, and also wear breast and shoulder ornaments) gather in one end of the village and head to the village priest for blessing. After that they, carrying buckets, go through all the houses, collecting donations – in each house they are given eggs, salt, grits and other foodstuffs for cooking the ritual porridge (the round is made in the opposite direction than that of the initiation of boys *эру карон* or *урай вось* performed on Maundy Thursday). A fire is lit on a small field *акашка бусы* (the field where the praying ritual *акашка* – the festival of the beginning of spring works – is performed). The maidens are not allowed to light the fire themselves; this is done by the father of one of the maidens or the young men participating in the *эру карон* ritual. The newly initiated young men watch over the fire, cook porridge and help the maidens during the whole festival (as the maidens face a transition to the other generation, they are not given the task of cooking porridge for the common meal).

When the porridge is ready, all the village people gather (differently from the young men's ritual, where only the men of the village gather, but

¹³ The description of the ritual called *ныл кураьськон* was first given by Y. Trofimova (Trofimova 1992: 44–49). The materials of the joint expedition of the NMUR and the ENM were used in Aado Lintrop's doctoral thesis (Lintrop 2000; 2003: 202–203; <http://haldjas.folklore.ee/~aado/rahvad/udme.htm>.)

¹⁴ The “*ныл кураьськон*” ritual of 1993 was participated by six girls born in the years 1976–1978.

the maidens and women are prohibited to come; neither are they allowed to watch the preparations for the *эру карон* ritual) with their own plates and spoons; they also bring home-made alcoholic drink called *кумышка*. When everybody has gathered (and by that time the porridge is also ready), the priest or the father of one of the girls (*вёсясь*) starts with the ritual: breaks some spruce branches and places them on the grass, laying a towel on top of them; then he puts a big bowl with the ritual porridge on the towel and a bowl called *сюмык*, into which maidens pour some *кумышка*. The participants in the ritual put money called *люгезь* on a certain spot on the spruce branches; this money is meant for buying or mending the ritual equipment, and it is held not with a bare hand but using the sleeve end (in order to avoid direct contact with the “alien” sphere). When the offerings have been made, the praying ceremony with the porridge begins. The people present say prayers, standing with their faces to the south, with the priest in front, followed by the newly-initiated maidens, then older men, young men, boys, and behind them women, maidens, girls. This ceremony is followed by a common meal, in the course of which the newly-initiated maidens treat their fellow villagers to a drink. This act is often merely symbolic: hardly taking a sip, everyone utters their good wishes – *таза лу!* (to your health!) and returns the glass to the maiden. When the festivity is over, the maidens take the ritual porridge to the priest’s house as a token of gratitude for his prayers, initiation and blessing.

On the following day, after the maidens’ ritual, the newly initiated young people gather for their own ceremony called *курэгпуз сиён* (egg eating). The eggs and grits left over after the *эру карон* and *ныльгёслэн куриськонзы* rituals are cooked separately by the young men and maidens in two houses, and then only the young people who participated in the rituals gather.¹⁵ Other people are not allowed to come. The onlookers (*учкыны лыктэмгёс*) are given boiled unpainted eggs through the window. Young people also bring the home made alcohol called *кумышка* for the party. They drink and eat here, make merry, play games, sing and dance.

¹⁵ Y. Trofimova points out that “after a few days the newly-initiated youngsters and maidens meet in the woods. There they boil the eggs that they have collected during *ныл кураськон* and eat them together. After that they make merry, play games, sing” (Trofimova 1992: 47). Probably beginning from 1985 the ritual was somewhat modified, and in 1993 the informants did not notify of the festivities in the woods any more.

After having a party in this house, they go to visit all the participants in the ritual (*нергее ветло*). Now, all the onlookers (*адзисъёс*) can also join in – both the young and the old people. In each household, they are asked to sit down and are offered some food, and the guests sing songs, dance, and make merry.

After performing these rituals, the participants – youngsters and maidens at the age of 16–18 are considered as fully-fledged members of the adult population of the village; they can get married, participate, equally with the others, in festivities and prayers, and youngsters can also be elected priests at religious praying ceremonies. It should be mentioned that youngsters and maidens of the same age, who have not gone through this ritual, but have already got married, as well as pregnant single women are not asked to participate in the ritual; yet, they can join in the common ritual meal equally with the other villagers.¹⁶

An unavoidable stage, in making preparations for getting married, was juvenile gatherings. Single young men went to these get-togethers to find a girlfriend and girls were looking for boyfriends; it was also the place where information was obtained about young people. A peculiar ritual related to coming of age was an inter-village youth's gatherings – “sittings” – which were organised after finishing the autumn harvest season – here boys and girls of pre-marriage age gathered. Sittings called *ныл брага* (“maidens' mash” or “maidens' beer”), which were widespread in the northern districts of Udmurtia (the folklore group from Vuzh Gya village performed this at the shooting of the film “*Северные удмурты в начале XX века*” (Northern Udmurts in the Early 20th Century) in 1988¹⁷, were still organised here even in the 1950s.¹⁸

The sittings took place in each village in succession. The inviting party organised food and drinks and laid the table. The foodstuffs were gathered as potluck; hot meals were made as well as pastry, beer, and confectionery. Before the event, an agreement was made with fellow villagers and two farmhouses were “bought out” – one for changing clothes, and the other for eating, drinking and merry-making.

¹⁶ Video archive of the ENM – V 062, the author's fieldwork materials from 1993. Informants Sedyk Grigoryeva, b. 1929; Mikhail Grigoryev, b. 1961.; Nikolay Ivanov, b. 1931.; Maria Ivanova, b. 1931.

¹⁷ Video archive of the ENM – V 004, 1988. G. Vereschagin describes an inter-village youth's ritual called *луко́н табань* (could be translated as “*посиделочные табани*” – “sitting bread”), which is similar to *ныл брага* (Vereschagin 2000: 217–218).

¹⁸ The author's fieldwork materials from 1988. Informant Nina Maksimova, b. 1932.

On the fixed day, the guests were met on the edge of the village, seen to one of the houses to change, and after that to the other, where the table had been laid. Young people sat at table in pairs – a youngster and a maiden. Village people came to “have a look at the pairs”. After the meal, at about midnight, maidens changed clothes, and then games and dances started, which lasted till the early hours of the morning.

“In the get-togethers called нӧл брага young people at the age of 16–17 participated. Teenagers and married people did not go there. When you were asked to come to the “maidens’ mash” for the first time, it meant that you were admitted among grown-up maidens and you were allowed to go to other villages to participate in the sittings and play games. If you were not yet asked to participate in the “maidens’ mash”, you could infrequently go walking with them if they asked you to come, but you were not supposed to go with them to other villages.”¹⁹

Similar youth get-togethers with guests invited from neighbouring villages were also organised in other places. So, in the village of Pysam, Malaya Purga district, even in the early 1960s, people observed the custom of an autumn festival *пинал куно* (young guest). In one of the houses, where grownup girls lived, the table was laid and guests from another village were received, and then the guests made a round of all the houses of the participants in the youth festival, where also tables were laid. The choice of the village from which guests were invited, was, according to the informant, determined by the fact that some people had friends or sweethearts there – *туганъёссы отысь вал*. After some time, young people made a return visit to the other village, where they were also warmly received and treated. This kind of ts youths’ visiting with a festively laid table, singing and dancing to accompaniment of the accordion or other instruments differed from “adult festivities” actually only by the composition of the participants, as it was meant only for young single people (*18 ареслэсь пичиез ой вал* – not younger than 18), and they organised the whole festivity themselves, although their parents still helped them with preparing the meal and alcoholic drinks.²⁰

¹⁹ Information from Galina Chibysheva (Popova 1998: 112). In Y. Popova’s opinion, the ritual called *нӧл брага* or *сизӧл брага*, which was performed by the Beserman of some villages, has been borrowed from the Northern Udmurts, as this kind of territorial get-together did not occur in other groups of the Beserman.

²⁰ Informant Olga Mikhailova, b. 1942.

Youth rituals were socially important not only for young people themselves, but also for the community as a whole. On the one hand, young people “introduced themselves” to the adult population of the village both when making rounds of the houses as well as at get-togethers, where the grownups came to “have a look at the pairs”. On the other hand, the adults viewed them not only as equals to themselves, but also as potential future spouses for their grownup children; perhaps they started to “observe” them more carefully.

The fact that a maiden was asked to participate in the inter-village sittings and other similar rituals kind of emphasised her sexual maturity and readiness for getting married. However, we lack practically any data about the first menstruation and activities related to smeared underwear – informants usually stress the girls’ shyness and reticence in this respect: “*She told neither her mother nor her friends – she was embarrassed. When she was washing her underwear in a stream, she was looking behind her back all the time to see if someone was nearing.*”²¹ The tabooing of the concrete topic is proved by prohibitions like “*you must not leave the smeared cloths lying about everywhere – an evil eye could be cast on you*” and the expressions widespread at present denoting menstruation: “*ас нерзе*” (word-for-word “on one’s own”), “*котыррьёсы котырам*” (word-for-word “one’s own things (objects, situation) around (me)”)²², “*куноосы вуизы*” (“my guests are here / arrived”), “*куноосы дорам ай*” (“my guests are still here”), “*праздникъёсы али*” (“I still have holidays”)²³, – this kind of intimate topic is directly related to the concept of dirtiness, filthiness “*жоб котырыд, кырсь*” (“(you are in / have) a dirty, unclean situation” or “it is dirty, filthy around you”)²⁴, and requires further study.

From a bride to a fully-fledged woman

The transition of the maiden into the social status of a woman was particularly regulated and ritually marked. This stage started with the wedding and finished with the birth of the first child. This period is characterised by the so-called “rituals of alienation” – the prohibition for the bride to return to her parental home earlier than three days after she

²¹ Informant Fyokla Mikhailova, b. 1910.

²² Informant aged 60.

²³ Informant aged 25.

²⁴ Informant aged 60.

was taken away from there; changing of the married woman's name, when she loses her maiden name forever and instead, gets the name of her family or is called after her home village; the tabooing of kinship terms on the husband's side; special regulation of the bride's behaviour in the new family (Vladykina 1998: 125). The period of the transition status of the bride is completed by the ritual called *сялтым* (or *чалтым*), which is directly connected with the cult of water.

One of the most complete reports of the *сялтым* has been presented by Grigori Vereshchagin, who has related the ritual directly to the women's festival called *шорт миськон* (washing of hanks), which falls at the end of February – beginning of March:

It is remarkable that in all Votyak rituals money plays an important role, especially silver coins – even at the so-called сялтым... Сялтым is divided into two parts: the first part is called the real сялтыман – extorting кумышка from the godfather or godmother for the fear of bathing or dipping into the ice-hole on the river; and the second part – сялтым – when the godfather, being at the шорт миськон at godmother's, treats the guests to кумышка procured by the godmother. It is known that the шорт миськон (washing of the yarn) is the main Votyak female festival, in the course of which women cook different treats for the yarn-washers. The godfather or his wife are also asked to participate in this festival as washers. On the river at the ice-hole, where yarn is washed, the godfather or godmother are threatened to be dipped into the water, in order to make them promise to procure a quarter of a bucket or less of кумышка. If they make the promise, they are not dipped into the water, but if they do not, they are bathed, i.e., their feet are dipped into the water (сялтыман), yet usually it is only a joke, therefore the act of bathing is accompanied by friendly bursts of laughter. There are, of course, those who cannot be stirred in their resolve, neither by threats nor by bathing (i.e., dipping into the water), and they remain determined... and the blackmailers have to back off, defeated... Yet, despite of all this, in the evening кумышка will be provided by the godmother at the сялтым. This is what сялтым is all about: the godfather together with other guests sits at the table on a bench, and the godmother gives him a three-litre-bottle of кумышка, putting it in front of them on the table, and next to the bottle – a glass with кумышка. In addition to this, the godmother puts in front of the godfather a kerchief with the value of about 25 kopecks²⁵ and asks him to receive this present and treat everybody with

²⁵ Some figures for comparison: in Glazov county in the 1860s a sheepskin fur jacket cost 18–24 kopecks, a coarse woollen peasant overcoat – 20–30 kopecks, a pood (16.3 kg) of barley – 30–35 kopecks, a pood of oats – 17–25 kopecks (Volkova 2003: 104–105).

кумышка as if it were his own, yet, usually, according to tradition, he himself has to drink the first glass, the second one give to the host-godfather, the third – to the hostess-godmother, and after that, if there is another godfather – to him and then, continuing agewise, as it is determined by the ritual. Each person, who gets a drink from the guest-godfather, even the host, gives him a coin, often a silver one, which the guest afterwards passes on to the godmother, but, getting a drink from the godfather, gives him a coin as a present. Treating this way the ones standing near him, the guest-godfather gives the bottle back to the godmother-hostess. After that, together with the rest of the guests sitting at table, he eats what he likes; meanwhile, the table has been laid – there are plates with the main course, pirozhki, and so on; also the so-called постряпушки made of wheat flour. Women are singing songs while the guests are eating. (Vereshchagin 1996: 122.)

The author has not made it very clear who exactly was worshipped at this ritual.²⁶ Probably it is about inviting and worshipping a newly-wed couple – godson and his wife, i.e., the bride, by the godparents of the newly-married man.

The dictionaries of the Udmurt language also connect this ritual with the washing of yarn:

Сялтым – Udmurt custom: while washing hanks, people are having a party in the honour of the bride or newborn – the bride treats the guests and the latter give her presents – coins (Borisov 1991: 275).

Сялтым – ritual of bathing in an ice-hole (when yarn wound into a hank is washed). *Сялтыманы* – bathing of the bride (*while washing yarn wound into a hank*) (Udmurt... 1983: 408).

Nowadays, the ritual called *сялтым* is more known as the bathing ritual of the bride in the water (river) on the first day of hay-making, which is probably related to the fact that, by the late 1950s, home-made fabric had been ousted by the manufactured one (Khristolyubova 1993: 143), and making yarn in great quantities as well as organising the ritual of washing hanks lost its topicality.

The rituals connected with the bride, which symbolised her rebirth in a new quality, differed even inside one district. So, only in Malaya Purga district, Udmurtia, several versions of it are known (the local name is

²⁶ According to V. Dal's dictionary, “*кум, кума* – godfather and godmother generally having a spiritual relationship; but for the godson himself they are not godfather and godmother, but only to each other, and regarding his parents and relatives” (Dal 1914: 559).

чалтым). In the villages of Pytsam and Novaya Monya, even in the late 1950s – 1960s the bride, fully dressed, was thrown into water on the first day of hay-making (чалтымак пылато – *bathe all over*. *Probably the name of the ritual is also derived from it – чалтым?!*), in the village of Staraya Monya (at the distance of three kilometres from the village of Novaya Monya) a plaited rope was tied round the bride's waist and she was pulled up over the upper crosspiece of the swing (a prop made of two poles and an upper cross-beam). To this ritual, people brought round loaves of wheat bread called *бискыли* made of flaky paste and bannocks made with whipped eggs called *күрегнуз табань*; elderly people said prayers. Later on, (in 1973), in the same village the bride was only soused over with water from a bucket during a festival called *гырон быдтон* (end of ploughing, i.e., spring fieldwork).²⁷ The description of this kind of ritual in the same district can also be found in literature, “On the first day of hay-making, young people, given permission by the elderly, hide a kerchief taken from the bride, or an apron or a longcoat, and throw them in a tree, and tie her to the latter (the modern version consists in untying the apron strings). Walking to her in succession all the new relatives (mother-in-law, father-in-law, brothers and sisters-in law), they ask her what she calls them. Not giving their names, the bride utters the corresponding terms of kinship, publicly stating her fully-fledged kinship to the new family. She is released only when her husband takes her things off the tree. After that the ritual of bathing starts” (Vladykina 1998: 118–119).

The rituals similar to the Udmurt ones were performed also by other Finno-Ugric peoples. So the Komi on the Luza, Letka and Vym Rivers in the first summer after the wedding, during hay-making and grain harvesting “bathed” the bride in the river several times – she was pushed into the water when she was doing her laundry or her kerchief was thrown into a tree. On the Vyshka and Mezen Rivers, a ritual called *нетсу* was performed. During hay-making, in a faraway meadow the bride cooked porridge, into which much butter was added. Her husband climbed a spruce, chopped off branches at the very top and tied the place up with birch-bark or a piece of sheet metal. After this the bride, turning to everyone working by their Christian name and patronymic, asked them to taste the porridge. These rituals somehow released the newlywed from

²⁷ Informant Olga Mikhailova, b. 1942.

everything that up to then had connected her with her parental home, with the “maiden’s will” (Limerov 2000: 143).

The throwing in the tree of the objects, which were the most characteristic parts of the female attire that the bride put on for her wedding party, symbolises the completion of the transition status of the bride. The ritual of bathing²⁸ similar to it in its meaning strengthens the mythological idea of death=rebirth even more (Vladykina 1998: 119).

This way the ritual called *сялтым* (*чалтым*), which was performed approximately half a year or a year after the bride settled down in her new home, became a starting point in the life of the young wife as a fully-fledged member of the new family, which was frequently strengthened by the birth of a child.²⁹ A maiden, becoming a woman, entering a new family, preparing to be a mother for her would-be children, was supposed to receive communion with water – the bride was definitely bathed in a river. It is interesting to mention that, apart from “communicating” the bride for her new family and new life, people turned to water in prayers for strong and healthy children. When bathing or sousing a maiden, a newlywed, a young wife, they were wished health (“*кускыд медаз жадьы*” – “may your back not get tired”), love of work and swiftness (“*киужлы шаплы мед луоз*” – “may she be fast in handicraft”), and so on. Here also exists the practice of strengthening with words (oral formulas) the magic activities connected with the natural qualities of flowing water – its fast continuous movement, freshness, transparency, the ability to cleanse.

²⁸ In 1988 the participants in the shooting of the film (Northern Udmurts in the Early 20th Century) explained the necessity of bathing the newlywed with the fact that the latter had to be given the possibility, when being wet through, take off her *шортдэрем* – a buttonless long overcoat; otherwise she would have had to work in «full dress»; at haymaking, women were allowed to wear just a shirt. (Author’s fieldwork materials, 1988).

²⁹ Some authors (Vanyushev 1986: 67) have compared *сялтым* with the ritual of bathing the bride on the second day of wedding, which is observed by many peoples (the Udmurts call it *виль кен/ак пылатон* – sprinkling the new daughter-in-law), before the bathing the bride has to change into women’s attire. The bride goes with the guests to a spring (well, river), where the oldest of the women, leading the procession to the river, or the mother-in-law sprinkles the head and feet of the bride with water, after which the bride has to scoop some water into buckets and all those present sprinkle water. The bride carries the buckets on a yoke, trying not to spill over the water, and her friends follow her, trying to splash the water over the brim. Later on the bride treats her new relatives to this water, and she is given money in return, or with this water ritual porridge is cooked for further blessing. The ritual of bathing the bride has gradually acquired a conditional character; nowadays the primary aspect is to test the bride with work. The wedding ritual of communion at a spring is also demonstrated in the film “Southern Udmurts in the Early 20th Century” by Aleksei Peterson and Serafima Lebedeva, Estonian National Museum, 1983.

Woman in a cult practice

The life of the woman, inside a family, was regulated by a whole range of prohibitions also after the termination of the period of avoidance, which was especially evident in cult practice when ritual purity was necessary. Yet, at the same time, the role of the woman in Udmurt family and cult rituals was extremely important. Even the family priest, the protector of family *воршуд* (*воршуд-утись*, deity-protector of family happiness, SK) “had to be married, as, together with him, according to tradition, his wife also performed services. The title of a priest was passed on from father to son. In the case when the priest died, having not passed on his title, the appointment of the priest depended on his wife” (Luppov 1999: 46). Also, only a married man was allowed to fulfil the obligations of the presiding priest, and sometimes, when his wife died, he was allowed to do it together with his daughter-in-law.

In the late 19th century, Grigory Vereshchagin pointed out a few rules related to the cult of worshipping deities and spirits:

1. Women without headgear symbolising the transition to the group of the elderly, and pants are prohibited to participate in sacrificial rituals;
2. Women are not allowed to slaughter animals or cook food from sacrificed animals;
3. In the domestic chapel called *куа* dedicated to the family deity *Воршуд* neither maidens nor women are allowed to move to and fro in front of the chest called *воршуд-куды*;
4. If the sacrifice is made to the sylvan spirit *Нюлэсмурт* (lit. “woodsman” – SK), *Керемет* (spirit of evil, also the place for performing pagan prayer ceremonies – SK), *Чер* (illness, sickness, spirit of disease – SK) and other gods and spirits taken over from other nationalities, women are not allowed to eat it;
5. In the places where women are allowed to be present, they have to wear clean clothes;
6. Menstruating girls and women are prohibited to be present at sacrificial rituals;
7. On the day of sacrificing no work can be done, you have to keep to absolute peace;
8. Men, especially priests, have to wear a white robe and bass shoes at sacrificial rituals; they have to gird themselves with belts;
9. Sacrifice to deities, except for *Чер*, and to the spirits of the deceased, must be a foal, not a much-ridden horse;
10. The priest, who is standing or sitting in a praying position, has to

wear a hat and hold twigs in his hands (Vereshchagin 1998: 38).

So we can see that six rules of the ten are directly related to women, one (connected with work) is concerned with both men and women, two of them are related to men (actually, priests), and one is connected with the sacrificial animal – this is an excellent example of sex-related regulations in cult practice.

Certain behavioural regulations are also observed in the religious praying rituals performed nowadays. So, only priests are allowed to enter the sacred site *луд* surrounded by a fence. Usually women do not enter the domestic chapel *кѳа* (if they do enter, they are allowed to keep only to the left-hand side), but in rituals performed in holy groves *луд* (or *керемет*) they are forbidden to participate. More often than not, women at common praying rituals remain “passive supervisors” of cooking the ritual meal. As was mentioned already above, the young men’s initiating ritual *эру карон* (the performing site is not far from the holy grove *луд*) also takes place without the participation of women, whereas the ritual of initiating girls is participated in by all the villagers.³⁰

In many an everyday, etiquette-related and ritual, situation prohibitions are simplified for women beyond the age of fertility, and they are bestowed certain “privileges”-obligations. The old woman is frivolously active in the rituals where the nearness of the Great Beyond is present – the ones related to birth and wake. It was only during the ritual called “*нунь сюан*” (infant’s wedding) that women could afford dancing squatting, clapping their hands under the knees. Obscene songs, unambiguous gestures (lifting the dancing women with the handle of the oven peel, covering the head with the lifted train of the dress, tucking up the train of the dress, trying to denude the father of the child – taking off his trousers, demonstrating his “manly pride” and, by doing so, make public his participation in the event) had to contribute to the “infectious birthgiving” (“*пиян мед палалоз*”). In other situations, these kinds of dance steps were regarded as impolite. It is necessary to mention that only elderly women, i.e., the ones that had crossed the threshold of fertility, consequently - a certain group in the life cycle – could afford such obscenities and gestures (Vladykina 1998: 308).

In the days of common intercession, performed in graveyards in the spring and in the autumn, it is the elderly who go from door to door – “*кисьтон нерге*”, and the hosts treat them to a glass of vodka and some

³⁰ Video archive of the ENM – V 001–002, 006–008, 062. 1988, 1989, 1993.

snacks. While the attitude towards drinking by women in Udmurt society was and still is rather negative, then this kind of behaviour from elderly women during certain periods is considered as acceptable, it might even be said that it is included in the obligatory set of regulations of the ritual.

The last “transition” ritual, which completes the transition of the woman to the world of the deceased, is the intercession for the dead parents “*йыр-пыд сётон*” (“sacrificing animal’s head and feet”) or “*вал сюан*” (“horse’s wedding”), when the married daughter sacrifices a cow for her mother (and a married son – a horse for his father). This is a colourful performance reminding us of a wedding. In both cases, *төр/төро*, sits at the end of the table (at wedding it is the chief, an honourable figure (Borisov 1991: 286), he is seated on a pillow in the red corner – SK), dowry is made for the “future life”, and suitable melodies of wedding songs are sung, yet, all the things in this ritual occur vice versa: at the wedding table *төр* there is a friendly couple, at the wake – just one person, an old woman or man, playing the role of the newlywed *виль кенак*; miniature clothing not suitable for real life, allowed at the wake, singing of wedding songs the other way round: in honour of man the melodies are played which at an ordinary wedding are sung by the relatives of the bride in the house of the bridegroom, and in honour of a woman – the melodies of the bridegroom’s relatives... Just like at a wedding, the activities are carried out in two different places. On the one hand, it is the house of the deceased, on the other – a place where the bones of the sacrificed animal are thrown. And then there is the obligatory travesty of the couple taking away the bones: the woman puts on a man’s hat, and the man – a kerchief or a headcloth, this way creating the situation of “the alien”, the beyond.³¹ After performing the “horse’s wedding” (3, 5, 7, etc. years after death), where “77 generations of ancestors” are asked (*77 выжы кулэмгёс*), the deceased is considered to have eventually entered the beyond and occupied a respectable place there (see the description of the ritual in Vladykin & Churakova 1986).

In all the ritual activities distinguishing the transition landmarks in the life of a girl/maiden/woman, equally to the protective functions, the

³¹This ritual of intercession has been performed by the Udmurts until now. Here the details related to trees should be emphasised: in this ritual, the bones of the sacrificed animal are either hung in a tree or thrown on its roots. And, what else is interesting in the context of the article, in some places, for example, in the village of Varklet Bodya, Agryz district, Tatarstan, the bones are taken to a place called *йыр-пыд куян* (word-for-word: place for throwing away heads and feet) exclusively by men. Video-archive of the ENM – V 001, 1988.

connection with the beyond – the world of ancestors – is carefully observed. In incantations-prayers, ritual visits, symbolic activities related to water, changing clothes, the existence of pairs (two houses) in young people's rituals, common meals, giving and receiving presents, joint merry-making accompanying women's rituals, their interfusion with the agrarian calendar – in all these we can observe the encoded system of symbols, images, ideas of the traditional world view of the nation.

Transition rituals are characteristic of all ethnoses and all times. The most significant Udmurt rituals, sacramental for each person and the whole society related to birth, wedding and funeral, continue to preserve many of their traditional features. Some other transition stages are perhaps not so important on a global scale; yet, having a certain meaning in changing a person's social status, are continuously transformed. Each ritual, being a "manifestation of contemporary life in each period of time, carries a many-centuries-long experience of the people" (Khristolybova 1984: 6) and reflects the mental, moral, social stereotypes and values of the society of its era. While, in traditional society, the life of each individual was regulated by the community, and the rituals were often related to the agrarian calendar, then, in modern society, many a ritual is performed in the seclusion of one's own family and next of kin; and side by side with the fading of certain kinds of working activities people also start forgetting the rituals connected with them. The beginning and end of school-time, university, getting a passport, the first salary and some others become the transition points in the life of Man. The essence and form of the ritual change, yet the idea remains the same – to ensure the further well being of the person, as well as of those surrounding them.

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