

THE REPRESENTATION OF *SÜREM* SACRIFICIAL RITUAL AMONG THE PRESENT-DAY MEADOW-MARI POPULATION IN RUSSIA

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1. INTRODUCTION

In July 1992 I made a short fieldwork trip to the Republic of Mari in Russia with Associate Professor Kaija Heikkinen at the University of Joensuu, Finland. During our visit we had a chance to document a ritual called *sürem pastrymaš* in the small Mari village of Koramas near the border of Tataria. The *sürem* is a sacrificial ritual performed in connection with the St. Peter's Day celebrations on July 12th. The term *sürem* denotes the expelling of the devil¹ and it is equivalent to the Turkic-Tatarian designation of šaitan. Participants in the ritual gather together and sacrifice animals to their God in order to purify their social environment from all that is impure, evil and harmful. During *sürem*-feast sheep, rams and geese are sacrificed in order to ensure the god Kugu Jumo's aid to the growing crop and to the people's efforts in gaining prosperity, health and success. In this presentation I shall examine some of the elements in the *sürem*-ritual and reflect upon its symbolic-cultural significance both in its local and in a wider ethnopolitical context.

2. RELIGIOUS SYSTEMS OF BELIEF IN THE REPUBLIC OF THE MARI

The Mari inhabit a geographical area that extends 23 000 square kilometers between two rivers – Vetluga in the west and the Vjatka in the east. In the southern part of the territory the Volga separates the Mari from the Chuvass over a distance of 100 kilometers. Nowadays there are approximately 700 000 people, who classify themselves as Mari, of whom about 80% (appr. 540 000) speak Mari as their mother tongue. The Mari are divided into three distinct ethnic groups: the Meadow-Mari, the Hill-Mari and the Eastern Mari. The majority of the republic's inhabitants are Meadow-Mari. The number of the Hill-Mari is approximately 10 per cent of the total Mari

¹ The actual expelling ritual have been traditionally performed with long birch-bark horns and with whips. Mainly young people and children are marching in processions from one border of the village to the opposite border, blowing their horns and whipping gates, walls, corners of the houses, benches, chairs, etc. The older people chase devils by the windows inside the houses. Horse race has also been an essential part of the *sürem*-ritual. See HÄMÄLÄINEN 1928, 29–34.

population. The Eastern Mari live in the Republic of Bashkiria consisting approximately of 100 000 persons.

The Mari have lived for centuries in close contact with Orthodox Russians and Islamic Tatars. In addition to Orthodox Christianity, their religious culture is shaped by Turkic-Tatar elements which are blended with indigenous systems of belief and forms of ritual representation. Notwithstanding the syncretism, the Mari categorize religious representations according to their ethnic traditions. The Mari who participate in rituals of indigenous religious traditions, but confess the faith of Russian Orthodoxy, are called *rušla vera*, i.e. they are recognized as Russian believers. In the mid-1990's approximately 60 per cent of the Mari population were classified as *rušla vera*. Five to seven per cent are religiously committed to the indigenous systems of belief (designated as 'nature religion'). They identify as *Ošmarij*, the white Mari. Being an *Ošmarij* is tantamount to being an "*imarij*, one who is an adherent of the old faith and thinks of him/herself as a pure Mari.² During the 1990's indigenous systems of belief have been revived in the rural villages, but received publicity and adherence also among artists and intellectuals in the cities.

3. THE LOCATION OF THE *SÜREM* RITUAL

The *sürem* ritual I attended was performed in *küs-oto*, which is a Mari designation for the sacred grove dedicated to the Oš Kugu Jumo (the great white god). The *küs-oto* of the Koramas village, where the *sürem* was performed, was partly destroyed in the forties by communists. What has survived from the olden times up to the present is no longer a very impressive grove, but a space with trees and bushes amid the vast corn fields of a collective farm. The sacrificial site was on the edge of a hollow with a huge linden tree as a distinctive topographic marker. The linden tree was still used as a sacrificial tree. Its branches were covered with white cloths which the local population had brought there as votive sacrifices.

The ritual was organized by the *Ošmarijs* of seven villages. The participants were mostly older men and women. The men sat in the shade of the trees at one end of the grove where they were joined by foreign visitors and reporters. Two men who acted as sacrificial priests, called *kart* in Mari language, were helped by both men and women who prepared the ritual setting and who assisted in the sacrifices. The older of the *karts* recited prayers by heart while the younger one seemed to be a novice as a sacrificial priest: he was reading the prayers from a little green book that had been published in Joškar-Ola in 1991.³ The religious folklore of the past generations is no longer transmitted in oral communication, but recycled from the archival sources back to the ritual contexts through publications.

The ritual scene was constructed around three main centers of activity: 1) the site where the animals were sacrificed and flayed, 2) the site where the trunks of linden trees

² TOJDYBEKOVA 1998: 262. > V. ŠABYKOV & S. ISANBAJEV 1995: 126–128.

³ The collection of traditional Mari prayers is edited by Nikandr POPOV 1991.

were set up in order to hold the cauldrons over the fire and 3) the two sites that were set apart as altars. Small sacrificial trees were erected on both places on the ground as a token of their sacrality, and white towels were tied around their branches as a sign of their purity. Food and candles were placed in front of and on both sides of the sacrificial tree. The ritual procedures were performed in an order which followed the animals' transition from their existence as biological entities into spiritual substances. As their throats were cut and their blood drained off in the sacred context of the ritual, the animals were transformed into vehicles for religious symbolization. The ritual displayed the meaning of blood as the symbolic vehicle by which the distinction between human and animal forms of living is transcended and united in the name of the god. It is the culture-specific category of the god according to which the members of *Ošmarij* communities define not only the corporeality of human beings, the gender distinctions and the relationship between human beings and animals, but also the boundaries of their ancestral land which gives life to all forms of existence. The idea of the god and the idea of the holy ground are intertwined in the cognitive-symbolic systems of *Ošmarij* popular thinking.

Addressed with the attribute *kugu* (the great) the god *Jumo* receives the souls of the sacrificed sheep, rams and geese, while the ritual participants cook the meat in the cauldrons and bring it to the altar and ask *Jumo*'s blessing before distributing and eating it. The altar and the branch of linden tree erected on the ground as a sacrificial tree symbolically represent *Jumo*'s presence in every stage of the ritual transformations.

4. THE MAIN SEQUENCES IN THE RITUAL

A. PRELIMINARY ACTIONS BEFORE THE SACRIFICE

The first victim of the day is a lamb. The animal is tied fast to a pole with a rope made of linden bark. An assistant to the *kart* makes sure that the lamb is acceptable as a sacrifice to the god, and the touch of human hands is washed off as the *kart*'s assistant pours water on the animal's back and strokes it with a spruce twig. Cold water is expected to cause shudders in the animal, and this is regarded as a sign of acceptance from the god.

B. SACRIFICIAL PRIESTS START RECITING PRAYERS TO THE GOD BEFORE THE ANIMAL IS FLAYED

"O the great God of sürem! The prophet, the messenger! Today on July 13th, on great Monday, the Mari people are gathered together prostrating and praying in front of you. Bless this day! We are the *Ošmarij* people. With unstarted bread, with unstarted honey-beer, with a candle, with cloven-footed and fur-bearing animals we beg you to give us happiness, health, happiness for our children, health, sensibility, good life for our families, protect us from headaches, fire, waves, bless our cattle, do not let our financial resources run dry! Give also prosperity to our collective farm!"⁴

⁴ The prayers in the videotape material of the sürem-ritual were translated from Mari into Finnish by Professor Sirkka Saarinen at the University of Turku. The English translation is by the present author.

C. SLAUGHTERING THE LAMB

Before the lamb is sacrificed, it is untied from the pole. Its feet are, however, tied together with a rope of linden bark. The animal is thrown over on its left side so that its head is pointing to the direction of the sacrificial tree in the altar. The lamb is slaughtered by cutting its throat and draining off its blood into a pit dug in the ground nearby the head. While the blood is draining off from the lamb's throat vessels, the *kart* holds a rope of linden bark in his hands and wets it in the blood above the pit.

D. WHILE MEAT IS BOILING IN THE CAULDRONS

A small linden tree is erected on the ground as a sacrificial tree and as a marker of the sacred space set apart for the altar. White towels are tied around its branches in order to mark the purity of the altar. The bloody rope of linden bark is also taken to the sacrificial tree and placed on its branches by the *kart*. Women participants bring bundles of wheat bread, curd cakes and home-made honey-beer with them as they arrive at the ritual site. The pastry is wrapped around newspapers; women open them up and place them on the altar. Adult participants in the ritual, including also us who were there as guests, were advised to perform a candle and a coin sacrifice. Those of the participants and guests who followed the advice, knelt down, made the sign of a cross with hands and placed a thin honey-wax candle on the candle-holder in the ground. A small coin was put inside the loaves. Every person donating a candle and a coin said a silent prayer. There was also a bowl on the altar where the participants in the ritual donated both coins and paper money, rubels. The money is needed for arranging future rituals.

E. AFTER THE BOILING, MEAT CAULDRONS ARE BROUGHT TO THE ALTAR

With a bread in his hand the *kart* blesses the meat before it is sliced and distributed to the participants. He carves a chip from a twig of the linden tree in order to make judgments about the god's favorableness, hits the blade of his knife against the edge of the cauldron in order to expel the evil and to tempt the god, his prophet and the messenger to visit the people. He asks Kugu Jumo to bless them with steel-like hardness, iron-like purity and chase the evil beyond the reach of the iron's sound.

The blessed food is eaten at a short distance from the altar. Kaija Heikkinen has described the communion as follows:

"The meal began with a dish made from the goose and sheep that had been sacrificed first, and was eaten beside the altar of loaves and candles. This was also offered to us outsiders. Then each family congregated to eat its meal together. Again we were invited to join in. A plastic cloth was spread on the ground and on it were placed a bowl of broth and a bowl of meat, spoons, a few forks, onions and bread. The women came round pouring out drinks. It was not only here that the people all ate from the same bowl, for the same custom was repeated in many villages.⁵

⁵ HEIKKINEN 1992: 13–14.

5. THE INSINUATION OF RELIGION IN THE EXPRESSION OF ETHNIC CONSCIOUSNESS

Although the temporal context of the ritual is Christian, the semantic content of the *sürem* is derived from the ethnic belief and value system of the Mari. By organizing the sacrificial feast the rural community recognizes that in the course of the agricultural year there are specific temporal periods that are considered qualitatively different from other periods. The sacrificial ritual is a social representation of that recognition. The *sürem* period that lasts for several days is set apart as sacred time and it is dedicated to actions by which community members can express the hopes and fears that they have in their individual lives and in the larger frame of socio-economic activities. The feast is at the same time a symbolic representation of those hopes and fears and an expression of long suppressed ethnic consciousness as Mari people. The participants in the ritual construct their identity according to markers of ethnicity in which animal sacrifice has traditionally played a visible role. In respect to the Russian population who portray their cultural identity in accordance with their faith as Orthodox Christians, the rural Mari rely on the traditional forms of the folk religion of their ancestors. The animals that are chosen as symbolic vehicles are established markers of values both among the peasant population and among the intellectuals. Sacrificing a sheep, a ram and a goose is a code that the members of rural communities can easily interpret according to their traditions. The sheep is an identity marker by which the membership in the *Ošmarij* communities is expressed, but also a symbolic expression of procreation. The supranormal recipient of the sheep is *Kugu Jumo* or his mother, Mother God of Childbirth. Sacrificing a goose represents health and it is addressed to Mother of the Day.⁶

After the fall of pan-soviet political ideology, the role of religion has become a central issue in Mari ethnicity. Animals continue to have meaning in religious symbolism since the Mari men still believe that all animal categories that have nutritional value are renewable resources, and their religiously motivated killing will increase their number and growth. Latest scholarly literature in the anthropology of sacrifice emphasizes that the idea of the god that ensures renewability of nutritional resources and encourages killing as a sacramental act of sustaining life, reflects conceptual systems of religious groups that are male-dominated. Women, on a general level, are participating in sacrifices mostly as silent onlookers who watch, pray and wait as my colleague Kaija Heikkinen has emphasized. By staying in the margins, women paradoxically take their place in the center of the ritual.⁷

The *sürem* ritual is part of a larger frame of ethnopolitical systems that people are creating as response to their newly gained freedom of self-expression. Nationalism and patriotism are ideologies of identification that have replaced the ideology of socialism.⁸

⁶ See HÄMÄLÄINEN 1921: 486–488.

⁷ HEIKKINEN 1992: 13.

⁸ For a good theory of the ideologies of identification and religious content of ethnicity see JENKINS 1997: 74–87; 107–123.

The ideological 'telos' of socialism has changed from producing equal access to material conditions of life to creating conditions for equal access to spiritual forces of life. There are still more than 350 sacred groves in the Republic of the Mari nowadays. Beside the Udmurts, the Mari are one of the few known people who continue to perform animal sacrifices in present-day Europe. The idea of preserving their primordial forms of religious life has become part of their ethnopolitics. They are representing their ethnic identity as confessional believers of what they call their ancient nature religion. One Mari journalist explained the viability of nature religion by the empirical fact that the Mari have lived for centuries far off the economic and cultural centers. They are a tribe of the forest who have been living in isolation and who continue to pay special attention to the distinction between 'them' and 'foreign' – a trait that characterizes their mentality.⁹ The concept of 'nature religion' refers to the tradition of performing rituals out in the open in their sacred groves. But it is also a label which the Mari have adopted to draw a line of demarcation between their way of believing and the Russian way of believing. The symbolic power of the concept has been recognized also among politicians. The government of Mari El has made a resolution to preserve the groves, and just recently it bought a farm outside the capital Joškar-Ola so that even the citypeople can participate in sacrificial rituals.

In 1991 the Mari activists founded an organisation called *Ošmarij-Čimarij Union*, which continues the work of "*Mari ušem*" (the Union of the Mari) that was founded in 1917 in order to oppose conversions to Christianity. Russian Orthodox churches have been built only in regions where the majority of the people are other than Mari.¹⁰ The principal sociocultural factor influencing the survival and renaissance of the ethnic forms of Mari religiosity can be, however, explained both by the structure of economy and by history. More than 65 per cent of the citizens in the Mari republic have earned their living from agriculture and forestry. Their profane values are inseparably connected to their sense of the power-laden places in the landscape of their everyday experience. The sacredness of the *kis-otos* and *keremets* is continuously present as a cognitive framework which influences the ways in which they relate to nature. Taboos that are connected with these places and that prevent people from destroying them remind people of obligations that they have inherited from their ancestors. Their popular religion is written into their landscape and into the ways in which they 'read' its semiotics. The landscape is also cognitively organized in human thinking in its temporality. The places that are set apart as sacred convey the people's historical consciousness. In Mari ethnicity, history has a strong mythological dimension and becomes manifest in the folklore of princes. The most famous of the princes was *Tšumblat* (Čumbylat), who lived in the 11th century and is respected as a national hero who started the tradition of sacrificial rituals. The prince *Tšumblat* is ritually memorized in the beginning of summer in pilgrimages to his grave at the foot of the stony mountain by the river Nemda. Pilgrims bring him corn, dresses and clothes, money, birds, tiny candles and ask for his help. With the sacred groves, *keremets*

⁹ JANALOV 1996.

¹⁰ JANALOV 1996.

and places of pilgrimage the Mari people link themselves both to their territory and to their history. As the meanings of things are disposed to change over time, it is the gods, heroes and ancestors which are kept intact and which guarantee the continuity of traditions.

SOURCES

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