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**‘SYULYK’ AS A SIGNIFICANT SYMBOLIC DETAIL  
OF THE UDMURT WOMAN’S IMAGE**



The paper is devoted to the symbolic significance of the *syulyk* (*śulik*) shawl–veil as an important detail of the Udmurt woman’s costume. The rituals with this particular costume attribute are analyzed. In the wedding ceremony the *syulyk* acts as a bride’s veil, and gradually changes its way of wearing. As a constant attribute of the female head-dress, the *syulyk* is used during a woman’s whole life, but depending on her childbearing functions, it also undergoes some changes both in its decoration and way of wearing. It was this head-dress that was used as the altar in all-family prayers thus fulfilling the connection with Gods. Thus three symbolic functions of the *syulyk* shawl are deduced: as a strange bride’s shawl, a symbol of woman’s fertility, marking her childbearing age, and a pagan altar as a connecting channel of the kin with supreme powers. The conclusion of an extremely important role of the Udmurt woman in performing pagan worship in the past is drawn.

*Keywords:* an image, a head-dress, the *syulyk* (*śulik*) shawl, *ayshon-sulyk*, a wedding ceremony, *vorshud*, an embroidery, ornamental symbols, a tradition, a costume, childbearing age, an altar.

The *syulyk* (*śulik*) is a shawl-veil over the top of the *ayshon* – a tall birch-bark female head-dress. For the first time the *ayshon-sulyk* was worn by an Udmurt woman at the wedding, which symbolized her entry into the childbearing period. With disappearance of the *ayshon*, the *syulyk* continued to be used as a bridal veil in many districts of Udmurtia until the middle of the twentieth century.

The base of the embroidered *syulik* pattern consists of large tree-shaped figures, directed from the four corners to the center of the shawl. In the center there is often a square formed with branches, symbolizing the fifth tree, located vertically. The embroidery pattern is created from simple geometric figures: rhombuses, crosses and triangles. The pattern applied to applicative *syulyks* consists of the same figures. The figures of the trees are no longer read on them that clearly, but the roots and the lower parts of the trunks are still indicated at the corners [Molchanova 2006, 109].

A lot of wedding and prayer traditions and rituals with the birch-bark *ayshon* and its covering *syulyk* have been associated with the Udmurts.



A ritual called '*kyshno karon*' (wife's deed) was held for the bride in the groom's house. The bride was taken to the bathhouse where she was disguised from head to toe, including her head-dress.

Before taking the dressed up bride to the guests, the ritual was performed with her cover *syulyk* called '*ektyas vilken*' (a dancing young woman). Several women danced in turn carrying the *syulyk* over their heads, and after that they covered the bride with it. The first wedding *syulyk* completely covered the young woman's face up to the chin. This way, without opening her face, the young woman wore it for several months. When visiting her new relatives-in-law, she had no right to enter their house, and she was treated outside the house [Bagin 1897, 83].

After a certain time the first *syulyk* was changed to another one, which opened the newlywed's face. It happened during the rite '*syulyk kyskon*' (taking off the veil). On the appointed day the husband's relatives were invited, and during the feast one of the relatives approached the young woman, took off her headdress and started dancing with it. Then he returned it to the young woman and took another *syulyk*, girded his waist with it and, dancing, took it home. This *syulyk* was only returned to the young woman the next day [Bagin 1897, 84].

There is also a noteworthy rite of embracing the bride to the new *vorshud*, in which the *syulyk* is also involved. *Vorshud* is a tribal shrine, the material attributes of which are kept in the family-clan sanctuary *kuala*. This small quadrangular building is located within the estate [Vladykin 1994, 273]. As early as the beginning of the last century the rituals associated with the *vorshud* were practiced, and everyone knew what *vorshud* she or he belonged to. After getting married the woman came under the protection of two *vorshuds*.

So, after the wedding, the young people made sacrifices and prayed in the *kuala* to ensure their family happiness '*ville vos*' (higher sacrifice). This ritual is described by G. E. Vereshchagin.

Prayer continued in the *kuala* all day, and, according to local beliefs, it was the best of all sacrifices and festivals. On this occasion, the young housewife baked pies, and her husband went to the woods to gather fir-tree branches, which were placed then in the right (foremost) corner opposite the entrance of the *kuala*. In front of the branches, the sacrificial food and the female head-dress *syulyk* were placed [Vereshchagin 1889, 107]. Thus the *syulyk* appears as a credence, as an altar.

The four-part composition and the designation of the centre of the *syulyk* recall the oldest sacrificial altars of the Indo-European peoples. The Scythians similar altar was described by Herodotus. Four pillars or a pole, functionally identical to the world tree, are characteristic. The quadrangular form of the altar is combined with a sword steadied vertically in the center [Raevsky 1985].

The Scythian altars can be compared with the ritual constructions of the peoples of Siberia, symbolizing the shaman tree during the clan's large ceremonies. The unifying idea of communicating with the world of gods with the help of a vertical pole, or a tree, or a world axis underlays in the grounds of such structures [Potapov 1991].

The Udmurts also make an altar (described by A. I. Yemelianov). During the prayers in the sacred grove "... four knots are pushed into the ground with their upper ends down. The crossbars – wooden rods – are put on the knots so that it turns into a kind of a table, also called *syulyk*. Some bread is put on this *syulyk*, and a piece



of boiled meat is put on the bread. Then porridge is cooked and put in a cup on the table. The ceremony of setting sacrificial food on the *syulyk* is called *vyle mychon* [Yemel'yanov 1921,107].

Thus three symbolic functions of the female head-dress *ayshon-sulyk* can be distinguished.

The first is that the bride's veil guards her from evil forces and at the same time isolates her from her new relatives, as she is a stranger from another household. In traditional societies, according to the rules of exogamy, marriages were only made with representatives of another household. Then people from another household were considered, to put it mildly, not quite people, like in a Komi-Permyak epic tale about the princess-frog. The main character, Kudym Osh, should marry the girl Heste, an ugly Mansi princess. Here is her description: "Before Kudym stood a monster without a forehead and with huge ears... Her thick lips trembled, the mouth was stretched from ear to ear, the nose was flattened, red nostrils fluttered with excitement... thin hair grew on white-yellow cheeks, her round brown eyes pleadingly looked at Kudym, they were meek and plaintive, like a beaten dog's... A round spider's body, fingers on the princess's long legs looked like bird's paws..." Only at moments of conjugal intimacy the animal-like bride acquires a human face: "At the moment when Heste in the whirlwind of fire and storm became Kudym's wife, her features changed: a clean high forehead rose above the eyebrows, a wave of hair fell on the marriage bed, a huge mouth closed, and the teeth like pearls glittered between the lips, the ears became beautiful and small, and Kudym felt in his hands a graceful maiden body" [Gribov 1975, 41].

In the Udmurt tradition, the entry into another family took place in several stages, accompanied by a change in the head-dress. Before the birth of the first-born, the woman wore *sjod syulyk* – a black *syulyk*, then it was changed for a red one – *gord syulyk*, which she wore until the termination of procreation. Thus, the second function of the *syulik* is the symbol of a woman's fertile period.

And, finally, the *syulyk* is an altar, the symbol of connection of not only the woman, but through her of all members of the family with the ancestral deities.

It should be noted that the Udmurt woman in the past was an active participant in religious ceremonies on a par with the man. P. N. Luppov called her "a strict keeper of the whole pagan cult" [Luppov 1901, 27]. Together with her husband, she performs priestly duties, on which the appointment of a family priest depends [Udmurts 1993].

According to G. E. Vereshchagin, during the prayers, the sacrifice and *kumyshka* (strong wine) are given to priests by women. In the days of public prayers, a woman is instructed not to be engaged in any work, come to a prayer in clean clothes and be sure to wear the proper head-dress [Vereshchagin 1995, 33-38].

According to the observation of N. G. Pervukhin, the village elder *tori pukis* and his wife *toro baba* sat together with the priests [Pervukhin 1888-1, 37].

According to the testimony of T. A. Kryukova, the *ayshon* of the priest's wife was kept as a ritual object in the *kuala* clan sanctuary and was inherited from generation to generation until it was decayed [Kryukova 1973, 48].

Such attitude to the *ayshon-sulyk* head-dress and the numerous rituals associated with it emphasize the high position of the Udmurt woman in the past: she was the guardian of pagan traditions and passed them from generation to generation.



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Received 12.07.2017

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**Сюлык – символически значимая деталь облика удмуртской женщины**

Статья посвящена символической значимости важной детали женского удмуртского костюма – платка-покрывала *сюлык*. Анализируются обрядовые действия обрядовых действий с этим атрибутом костюма. В свадебном обряде платок-*сюлык* фигурирует как покрывало невесты и поэтапно меняет способ его ношения. Как постоянный атрибут головного убора платок-*сюлык* использовался на протяжении всей жизни женщины, но соответственно ее детородным функциям, он претерпевает изменения в своем внешнем оформлении и в способе ношения. Именно этот женский головной убор использовался в общеродовых молениях в качестве алтаря, осуществляющего связь с богами. Таким образом, выясняются три символические функции платка *сюлык*: покрывало



невесты – «чужеродки»; символ женской плодовитости, маркирующий ее детородный возраст; языческий алтарь – канал связи всего рода с высшими силами – что подводит нас к выводу об исключительно важной роли удмуртской женщины в отправлении языческого культа в прошлом.

*Ключевые слова:* платок-сюлык, свадебный обряд, воршуд, вышивка, орнаментальные символы, традиция, костюм.

**Citation:** Yearbook of Finno-Ugric Studies, 2017, vol. 11, issue 3, pp. 138–142. In Russian.

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Поступила в редакцию 12.07.2017

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