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**THE SACRED PLACES  
OF THE BASHKORTOSTAN UDMURT**



In this short article, we attempt to summarize some data and reflections about the Eastern Udmurt's sacred places, focusing mostly on places used for collective ceremonies at the village (and not at the family) level. Firstly we present these places from the point of view of continuity and show that most of the sacred places have remained the same for a long time, although changes in the agricultural system led to eliminate the rotation in the use of the fields and hence the rotation in the use of sacred places. The main changes of sacred places have been a consequence of the Soviet anti-religious policies, which compelled the villages to choose more hidden places for their ceremonies, for Soviet officials used to interrupt the ceremonies and to knock over the cauldrons with the sacrificial food. Then we introduce a recent phenomenon, the fencing of all sacred places: while traditionally only the *Keremet / Lud* ceremonies took place in a fenced location, now all the sacred places are being fenced and where they still are not, the wish to have them fenced is rising. We attempt to expose the reasons behind it and we conclude with some reflections on the possible different levels of sacredness for the Eastern Udmurt, an issue that requires further fieldwork to be developed.

*Keywords:* Eastern Udmurt, ceremonies *Keremet / Lud*, collective ceremonies, continuity, fencing, indigenous religion, levels of sacredness, rotation of the fields, transformations in agriculture, sacred places, Soviet anti-religious policy, stability, transfer of sacred places, village ceremonies.

This article is based on fieldwork conducted since 2013 with the cooperation of several colleagues – Estonian anthropologist Liivo Niglas, Udmurt ethnographer Ranus Sadikov and Udmurt folklorist Nikolay Anisimov – in Udmurt villages in Bashkortostan studying the villages' religious practice and the collective ceremonies. We have thus visited different villages in Tatyshly, Yanaul, Buraevo and Baltachevo districts of the northern Bashkortostan. We sum up our reflections about sacred spaces and sacred places.

Of course, much has been written about sacred places in the regions inhabited by the Eastern Udmurt [2, 3, 5, etc.]. However, our focus differs from that adopted by the Russian ethnographers in its perspective: while they all start from a historical point of view, and review the places and ceremonies that existed, we are not interested in treating the contemporary Udmurt as living within a degraded culture, compared to its height at the



beginning of the 20th century. We are interested in a synchronic approach, in which we view the culture the Udmurt are living in at the beginning of the 21st century as a whole, and try to find out the points that make sense for them. We do not refuse to turn to history, but treat it as something people remember and must relate to. Moreover, from a general point of view, we think that the choice of the beginning of the 20th century, while perfectly understandable as a milestone before very quick and substantial changes, is nevertheless arbitrary, because qualitatively it does not differ from the others before and after it: it was only a moment in a dynamic continuity, that may be examined in diachrony as well as in synchrony, as all the previous and following moments. So we take 2015 as the fixed point of our observation and view the state of the Eastern Udmurt's sacred places as it is today.

### About the notion of sacred place

Let us have a look at the terms used. While scientific literature in Russian uses the term “*svyashchennoye mesto*”, literally “sacred place”, in Udmurt all that we find is “*vös'yas'kon inty*”, literally, place where a ceremony takes place [6]. So we shall not dwell on the notion of ‘sacredness’, for the Udmurt do not emphasise it, rather they focus on the function of the place.

As Udmurt scholar Tatyana Minniakhmetova observes, talking about the Bashkortostan Udmurt (and using in the Hungarian translation, the notion of sacred place): “in this region the sacred places may be found on arable lands, in the forest, on fields, on fallow lands or near them, on the riverside, in the garden, in the vegetable garden, in the yard or in the house” [4. P. 43]. Because of the character of our fieldwork, which has been focused on village ceremonies and not on private forms of worship, we shall not here take into consideration the more intimate places – which does not mean that they do not exist or that they are not significant for the Udmurt at the moment –, we will concentrate on the locations of the collective prayers.

Today, that means outdoor locations, because there are no sacral buildings functioning as such. However, they existed in the past, and we will mention what remains of them in the memory and in the practice of the Udmurt today.

### The Udmurt sacral building: the *kuala*

Although in Bashkortostan religious activities have been pretty well maintained, no *kuala* is at the moment used as a sacred building. Despite this, we know that the simple building called *kuala* was used in two configurations. Apart from the family *kuala*, in the yard of the house\*, there was the big *kuala*, a building used for clan ceremonies, as the one that still exists and functions in Kuzebaevo (Alnash district, Republic of Udmurtia), where the *bydžym kuala* clan gathers for example on July 12<sup>th</sup>, St Peter's day, for a sacrificial ceremony. This kind of ceremony no longer exists in Bashkortostan.

There are still some traces of the *kuala* in the memory of older people. For example, Lidiya Garaeva, whose grandfather was a *vös'as'* in Bigineevo, remembers the Bigineevo *kuala*, and this memory even has concrete consequences in her deeds. She grew up with her grandmother and learned a lot from her about sacral issues. She remembers that in Bigineevo there was a *kuala* for the clan:

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\* While we have not heard in Udmurtia of any one remaining, we had the possibility in June 2016 of visiting some still being used as domestic buildings in last four households in Varkled Bodya (in the Republic of Tatarstan, but a few kilometres from the Udmurt border).



– We had a *kuala*, it was separated, it was a small house.

– You mean, a village *kuala*?

– Yes, a village *kuala*. People went there with... how do you call it, their genealogical tree, so, all our kin, they all met there. On my father's line, yes, it seems so, the people who met were all kin on my father's side (Lidiya, June 2014).

And she continues:

– My father and my stepmother were hit by lightning. They died together, side by side, at the same moment, they had gone haymaking and they were on their way back. Before they died, they had disassembled the *kuala* and they had been told not to touch the logs, until the soil had been transferred to another place. And then, the same year, it happened, so no new *kuala* was built. The house was sold, my parents died, the girls married. Only the year before the last I closed the *kuala*. Because it did not function any more. I closed it; we sacrificed a lamb. I gathered everybody, those who attended this *kuala*. And then we prayed and we said that the *kuala* does not function any more. So that God would not require us to pray there. If I wouldn't have done it, I would have had remorse, because I was there as a young girl. It was my responsibility. Therefore I did it. (Lidiya, June 2014).

So this *kuala*, or the remembrance of it, of the logs that were the only thing remaining of it some decades ago, still makes sense for a 60-year-old woman who was a little girl when the *kuala* was demolished. She felt responsibility: if not properly closed, the place becomes dangerous. She had proof of it, on the example of a woman in the same village, who had a *kuala* in her own yard. The *kuala* had been demolished long ago and metal was accumulated on the spot where it had been. At some moment she went blind. She asked a fortune teller, who told her about the *kuala*: she cleaned the place and was able to regain her sight.

There were also private *kuala* that were used as the family sanctuary. Actually none functions, neither in Udmurtia, where none has been conserved, nor in Bashkortostan, where we have information about some of them. While they have not been actively used in worship for decades, their sacral character is still well acknowledged by their owners. We will introduce some examples of how the attitude towards these buildings is still very much one of respect and fright.

In our fieldwork we have stumbled on three examples we shall develop here.

The first is in the village that Lidya married into, Aribash (Tatyshly district), where the population is 92 % Udmurt. There was a *kuala* in the yard of one of the inhabitants. The *kuala* was symbolically closed with a ceremony, and the building was also physically closed. It is no longer used, neither for religious goals nor as a summer kitchen. But it is possible to have a look at it from the outside.

The second example is in the village of Altaevo (Buray district). There was a *kuala* in the yard of a village dweller. Ranus Sadikov writes in his fieldwork notes:

“We visited the dwelling of Haziemetov, Galiahmat Galiahmatovich (born 1935). There are in his garden the rest of the foundations (a stone) of a *kuala* (*kaksya kuala*). He prays there twice every year in spring for *Bydzhynal* and in autumn at the autumn prayer ceremony (*siz'yl kuris'kon*). Then he holds in his hands a loaf of bread and brings also coal from his oven”.

Here we have an example of a *kuala* that no longer exists, but which is still a fully active sacred place, with its very discreet remains maintaining all of the sacred character of the building.



The third example is interesting because it shows at the same time remembrance and oblivion: in Kizganbashevo (Baltachevo district) there were three *kuala*; in 2000 they were all surrounded by fences. In 2016 only the third of them, a place where a fir tree has grown, is still encompassed by a fence. The other fences have rotted and have not been replaced, although the remembrance of it is alive at least for the local sacrificial priest who showed us these places. The fir tree is well looked after by a Tatar woman; the sacrificial priest told us that she started to neglect it and this was followed by several catastrophes in her life, so she decided to mend her ways.

### **The sacred places where ceremonies are held**

Ceremonies are held in practically all the villages of the Bashkortostan Udmurt. As one of the authors has developed elsewhere [9], in many places the traditional ceremonies lasted throughout the Soviet period, while in others they faded in the 1970s and 1980s. However, in those places where the tradition was not forgotten, and during the 1990s or early 2000s, there was a revitalisation, either at the initiative of the local population and / or with the help and support of the local authorities. In the choice of the locations, both continuity and rupture may be emphasised.

### **Continuity in the choice of location**

Usually, except in the cases mentioned below, when there was a serious reason for moving, the new places chosen were among the traditional ones. We use the word “among” because earlier there were different places used for spring ceremonies: when fields were managed on three-year rotation, until the 1950s, every year the spring ceremony was held on the sacred place near to the field where rye was growing. Today the changes in agricultural management have induced change and the villages have one place for this ceremony. Usually these are located in beautiful spots, although they are all very different from one another. Some are high on a hill (Aribash), others down on lower ground (Uraz-Gylde), some are close to the road (the one on the Kyzlyar road for the Alga group Bagysh vös’); others are quite far from it (Alga). It is important to have nearby a source of water, for water is always needed: thus some are close to streams (Juda, Kizganbashevo, Altaevo), and some to springs (Asavka, Uraz-Gilde, Balzyuga, Nizhnebaltachevo).

### **Some elements of rupture in the choice of location**

Apart from the changes in agricultural management, which induced the desertion of some sacred places (which are still remembered at least by the sacrificial priests), there were other elements of rupture.

One circumstance that led to a change of sacred place was the Communist Party’s anti-religious policy. In some villages, the sacred place was quite visible and exposed. For example in Balzyuga, it can be clearly seen from the road. This allowed the Party officials, at least once, to interfere and disrupt the ceremonies, and so the place was just transferred to a more discreet spot – in the case of Balzyuga, some 30 meters further, in a lower location. Visibility was also the reason why the biggest ceremonies, in the case of the two religious groups of the Tatyshly Udmurt, where either nine or ten villages gathered, were moved to more discreet locations: the villages of the southern side of the River Yug used to gather in the regional centre, and subsequently moved to a smaller village,



Vilgurt. On the other side of the Yug, the 10-village ceremony was held in a beautiful place in Starokalmiyarovo. One inhabitant of Starokalmiyarovo comments: “Formerly, the *mör vös*’ was held on the top of our village hill. During the sacrifices, the party officials from the district dispersed the people who attended. As on the top everything was visible, the location of the ceremony was transferred to a place below in the 1960s. And from there, it was transferred in 1978 to Alga, where nobody sees that there is a ceremony” [7. P. 339]. Alga is indeed a tiny village (70 inhabitants). In all of these cases, the transfer was achieved with a ceremony: soil and ashes from the former place were brought to the new one.

Another example is the regional centre, Upper Tatyshly (Verhnye Tatyshly), which, unlike the other villages, is far from being an Udmurt location: of around 6700 inhabitants\*, only 13 % are Udmurt. Actually, when the biggest ceremony was transferred to Vilgurt, the centre also ceased to hold the local ceremony. The place where they were held was filled with new constructions. Another place was quite remote. When they decided in 2015 to hold a local ceremony again, the organisers found a brand-new location, whose advantage was that it was located in front of the building where one of the local leaders had his apartment: practically he was the one to provide the land. The first attempt was quite timid. No sacrifice took place, but the response by the local Udmurt was astonishing. So the second year, they built a fence and held a proper ceremony with the sacrifice of a lamb.

### New trends

One important new trend, as illustrated by the previous example, is the recent custom to surround sacred places with a wood fence. Traditionally only *keremet* places were fenced as they were considered dangerous [6. C. 215]. Now all the sacred places tend to be protected by fences. While the traditional fence had one main goal – to protect against potential trespassers – today the fence has two functions: the first is to mark this space as special and to impose the recognition of it on everybody; the second is to protect the place from vandalism by the non-Udmurt population. In June 2016, the young Asavka sacrificial priest Vladimir complained that the sacred place is used by non-Udmurt youngsters as a place to drink. In a round table one of the authors – Eva Toulouze – attended with the local authorities and the national movement’s leaders, all participants emphasised the need for fencing and no one commented on the infringement of tradition. It is clear that this change is connected with changes in society: knowledge about sacred places is no longer widely shared, the population is no longer totally homogenous and making visible the places important to the Udmurt population has become a question of identity.

Fences have usually been built with the help of the local authorities – at the end of the 1980s and in the 1990s the local kolkhoz, which soon became an agricultural production cooperative, was usually very active. This is the case in the Tatyshly district: south of the River Yug, the villages worked for Demen, the Udmurt enterprise which, in Vilgurt, not only built a fence, but also a prayer house. This is not to be mistaken for a *kuala*: the house is only for comfort and presents no sacred features. It is, in the case of Vilgurt, a small exhibition room, with information about the ceremonies and local history, and a table where special guests may be asked to eat and to talk; the sacrificial priests and their assistants can comfortably count money there and keep

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\* All the data about the villages come from the 2010 census. Cf. Toulouze, Vallikivi 2015 [8].



warm in the winter ceremony (*tol vös'*), when outdoors the temperature is close to -30. Exactly the same approach was taken by the kolkhoz on the other side of the Yug, the Tatar-Udmurt enterprise Rassvet, the main accountant for which, Evgenij Adullin, is also the main sacrificial priest of the religious group. But in other places the main financier may also be some high-ranking Udmurt, as in Votskaya Oshya.

### **Other places connected with ceremonies: *keremet* or *lud***

For the Bashkortostan Udmurt, local traditions are very important and may differ significantly from one another. In several villages, probably once in all villages, there was another cult, which was not in competition but completed the ceremonies in spring and winter. It is the ceremony called *keremet* or *lud*. Actually these words designate both the ceremony and the place where it is held.

These locations were supposed to be dangerous and were fenced already in old times. The previously mentioned spring and winter ceremonies and *keremet* are separated as locations and they have different priests. There is usually a special sacrificial priest for *keremet* ceremonies. In some places this lineage is known to have disappeared because of the death of a particular priest who had no successors. One of the other differences between this ceremony and the others is that *keremet / lud* is a highly masculine ritual activity – the sacrificed animals are usually male, and only males are admitted (although there may be exceptions).

Usually the *keremet* is a grove. It has become traditional today that *Keremet* places as in Votskaya Oshya or Kizganbashevo are well protected by high trees. The first is a text-book example: inside the fence, which only the officiating priest is allowed to enter, there is a table. Everyone attending gathers behind the fence.

One interesting case of confusion is the case of Aribash's spring ceremony. This is held at the same time as the other villages' spring ceremonies, and afterwards Aribash participates to the *mör vös'*. But unlike all the other ceremonies, Aribash's spring ceremony follows all the rules of the *keremet* ceremony: the place is the sacred place of *keremet*, the sacrificed animals are male, the women prepare flat bread, which is a speciality for *keremet*, and the participants from the village are all men. In the process of revitalisation, the two ceremonies have clearly been mixed up.

### **Other sacred places: places connected with the dead**

In Udmurt spiritual culture, death and the dead occupy a significant place. The two worlds are both separated and connected. The ancestors are remembered regularly and there are special ceremonies both on the family level and on a more collective level. The dead ancestors have an enormous influence on the life of the living: they must be fed, and propitiated lest they send disease, crop failure or catastrophe [1. C. 25].

Some places are particularly connected with the dead.

One of these is of course the 'contact place', the graveyard (*shay*). This a special place, the doorway, the place where the dead dwell. We have had no opportunity to follow a burial, so we shall not dwell on this point. However, although graveyards are not a place to visit without a reason, we have visited a couple of graveyards: our landlady showed us (at our asking) the Balzyuga village graveyard. We also went a second time to the graveyard to honour some acquaintances who had passed away in the



meantime. In addition, in other villages we have been shown a couple of ‘interesting’ graveyards, and the presence of the ethnographer seems to be reason enough indeed.

Usually graveyards are wooded places that are fenced. They have a gate that opens to visitors: to cross it is a significant act, which must be accompanied by a prayer, and people are supposed to enter and leave from the same portal. Cleaning a grave is not reason enough: graveyards are not taken care of from this point of view. Herbs grow, both between the graves and in the grave territory (usually each grave is surrounded by a metal fence).

When visiting a graveyard, whatever the reason, one has to bring offerings to share between multiple graves – bread, pancakes, chocolates, eggs, spirits; one throws these offerings onto the graves, either silently or while speaking to the deceased. The graveyard is also a place where commemoration rituals are performed, for example the obligatory visits on the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 40<sup>th</sup> days after the funeral, the anniversaries, and others. For example in Votskaya Oshya, a graveyard we have visited even twice, offerings are made one year after one’s parents’ passing – a cow for one’s mother, two geese for one’s father (traditionally it was a horse); the skulls and the bag with the bones are hung in the tree. Here this ritual is called *ullan' s'oton*, in other places it is called *jyr-pyd s'oton*, although its place is not always the graveyard\*.

### Different levels of sacredness?

Some places seem to have a strength of their own. Thus Anatoli Galikhanov, Altaevo’s sacrificial priest, who is quite well known and authoritative, commented when he showed us in June 2016 the location of the main ceremony. It had started to bucket down, the rain was very violent and we jumped out of the car: Galikhanov insisted that this was a very strong place that was often hit by lightning, so we had a glimpse, but we did not linger.

The question above emerged during fieldwork in Varklet Bodja (Tatarstan) in June 2016, when young sacrificial priest Oleg Mikhailov showed us (Ranus Sadikov and Eva Toulouze) the former place where *jyr-pyd s'oton*\*\* was performed (until they became aware that this place was upriver, while according to the rules it is supposed to be downriver). In this place it is still possible to see the skulls hanging from the trees, and the soil is covered with bones and moss. Oleg asked Ranus: “Is this considered a sacred place? It is certainly not as sacred as the place where it is performed now”...

We have no answer to his question. But on the basis of our fieldwork, we certainly have the impression that some places are more loaded with sacredness than others. More precisely, some spots within the sacred places are more sacred than others, they are something like the core of sacredness.

This is physically also expressed in the villages north of the Yug, those that take part in the *mör vös'* in Alga. This space is articulated in quite a sophisticated way. Actually there is a first fenced unit, which is quite large and is also divided into two parts. One is an external space, which includes the house, where anyone can stay, while the other part is where the sacrificial priest and his assistants perform. The message

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\* As in Varkled Bodja (Republic of Tatarstan), where there are different locations in which this ritual has been performed. But this is outside the borders of the Bashkortostan Udmurt.

\*\* For more details about this very interesting ritual, see Anisimov 2012 [1].



transmitted by this geography is that nobody external is admitted within this space, where the only people allowed are those who have something to do there. Actually, this included our cameraman, who was completely free in his movements. Women were not admitted in this central part, although some local women were not shy of doing so. They were sent back, but not too harshly. This spatial articulation contrasts with the practice of the villages south of the Yug, where the space is not internally articulated and where you have the impression that no place is more sacred than any other: around the cauldrons, or behind the place where the priests pray, women had free admittance.

In Asavka, where there was no internal spatial articulation, the sacrificial priest tried to explain that there was a central triangle that was particularly sacred, between the cauldrons, the place where the priests prayed and a horizontal pole on which the towels hung. His explanation was convincing from the intuitive point of view, but he got mixed up with the details by trying to say that nobody could stay there and try to do something unless that person was included in the team.

### **Behavioural patterns**

Sacredness has consequences on how people are expected to behave. What is the situation today? What are the expectations? Are people aware of the rules?

Probably rules were much more rigorous in the times when traditional culture and values ruled society unchallenged (see Minniyakhmetova 2015 [4]). Then they were transmitted and all the population was aware of them.

The sacrificial priests and their assistants usually try to inform the people of how they are supposed to behave. The remarks above of local women entering the sacred space shows that many are not aware of the most subtle reasons. We must not forget that eighty years of atheist education have left their imprint on most people, not only limiting their knowledge but also dulling their sensitivity.

The rules that priests try to have people respect are mainly connected with clothing. Traditionally there were wider rules, about being dressed in white for example. But even today there are some basics: in a sacred place neither men nor women are supposed to be bare-headed: men must have a hat, a cap or any kind of headgear and women are supposed to wear scarves, which they usually do in villages, although not in a town environment. No part of the body is supposed to be bared: men and boys as well as women and girls are not supposed to wear shorts – legs and arms must be covered. During our last field trip, in the village ceremony of Nizhnebaltachevo, some young boys arrived in shorts and were quickly sent home by the adults, who threatened them with the main organiser, Farhullah, who is quite severe. In this case, the whole community took upon itself the role of the educator. But often priests complain that people no longer know how to behave: Galikhanov voiced complaints about women coming to ceremonies without headgear and barefoot... (June 2013, June 2016). But clearly he, as well as his colleagues, feel quite powerless in front of the abysmal ignorance he has to face.

### **Conclusion**

Sacred spaces are very much present in the modern life of the Bashkortostan Udmurt, for the whole population usually attend the local ceremonies; while there are usually some reluctant people in a village, enquiries show that everybody gives crops for the ceremonies





and receives the sacrificial gruel, so all have at least some connection with the sacred. During the Soviet period, when religious activities were more clandestine and probably mainly concerned the older segment of the population, people were certainly more aware of sacredness, were more sensitive to the border between the profane and the sacred.

Today the sacred has penetrated everybody's lives and has become commonplace in the Udmurt microcosm. The situation is not so clear in other environments, where everything about the Udmurt forms of religiousness is ignored. That's why the Udmurt are at present trying to identify clearly what is sacred and what is profane and to make it visible: a single grove may not be enough to inform those outside the Udmurt community about the sacred character of a place. Fencing it may give a hint: private property is fenced, but also some spaces that are usually recognised as deserving respect, such as graveyards.

Probably a deeper enquire should be made in order to understand what the understanding of sacredness is in the contemporary Bashkortostan Udmurt population. This would require longer interviews but could be quite informative about the perception of the relation between particular places and the feeling of sacredness, as well as completing the vision we have at the moment, which is very much based on observation and not on emic perception.

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### **Священные места удмуртов Башкортостана**

В статье представлены данные и размышления о священных местах закамских удмуртов. В сфере интересов исключительно такие, где проводятся коллективные моления, но здесь не рассматриваются семейные обрядовые места. Во-первых, в статье они представлены с точки зрения преемственности традиции, показана значительная устойчивость священных мест, несмотря на то что преобразованиями в сельскохозяйственной системе больше не практикуется ротация в использовании полей, а в результате – исчезла ротация и в использовании священных мест. Главные изменения в выборе мест связаны с антирелигиозной политикой советского периода. Иногда случалось, что партийные работники прекращали моления и пинали, опрокидывая котлы с жертвенной пищей. Интерес представляет новое явление: огораживание священных мест и не только мест проведения молений *керемет / луд*, но даже тех, где ограды еще нет, растет желание их построить. Вероятно, это связано и с разной степенью почитания (священности) мест. Однако изучение этого вопроса требует дополнительных полевых исследований.

*Ключевые слова:* деревенские моления, закамские удмурты, коллективные моления, моления *керемет / луд*, ограждения, преемственность, преобразования в сельском хозяйстве, ротация полей, священные места, перемещение священных мест, советская антирелигиозная политика, стабильность, степени священности, язычество.

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