

Transmission of Ritual Tradition among the Rural Meadow-Mari Population in the Post-Soviet Political Context

A test case to the theory of the modes of religiosity

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1. Framing the issue

In his theory of the modes of religiosity, the British anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse invites religion scholars to pay attention on the question how memory systems contribute to the formation of tendencies by which people universally codify, transmit, cognitively process and socio-politically organize religious knowledge. The bulk of his theory rests on the distinction between the imagistic and doctrinal modes of operation and their conjectural role in constraining the formation and transmission of religious ideas in actual sociopolitical context (Whitehouse 1995; Whitehouse 2000). Whether the distinction and its psychological and sociological implications provide a successful tool that scholars of religion can utilize cross-culturally is open to critical inspection? In this article I look at the issue and its basic postulates from the perspective of folk religion of the Finno-Ugric Meadow-Mari population in present-day Russia.

I shall treat ethnographic materials that I collected ten years ago during my short fieldwork trip to the Mari Republic. The Mari inhabit a geographical area in Eastern Russia. Their territory 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 100 kilometers. Nowadays there are approximately 670 000 people who classify themselves as Mari, of whom about 80% 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 60 000 (10 per cent of the total Mari population). Approximately 100 000 persons who belong to the Eastern Mari are living dispersed in the Republics of Tatarstan and Baškortostan.



During my visit I had a chance to document a ritual called *sürem pastramas* in a small Mari village of Tjodrajäl near the border of Tatarstan. The *sürem* is a sacrificial ritual performed in connection with St. Peter's Day celebrations on July 12th. The term *sürem* denotes the expelling of the devil. The notion 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. The actual expelling rituals 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. (See Hämäläinen 1928, 29-34). The principal episode in the expelling ritual is the *sürem*-feast during which sheep, rams and geese are sacrificed in order to ensure God's (designated as Jumo in Mari language) aid to the growing crop and to the people's efforts in gaining prosperity, health and success.

2. Transmission of the *sürem*-ritual in the village of Tjodrajäl in 1992¹

The religious repertoire of the Meadow-Mari population is based on ethnic tradition elements. Ethnoreligious heritage is reflected in the visibility of sacred

¹ See Anttonen 1998.

groves even in the post-Soviet religious life of the rural Meadow-Mari. These sites, designated in Mari language as *küs-oto* and *keremet*, are set apart from the rest of natural environment both for the God and for the evil spirits, respectively. They do not function only as established sites for transmitting ritual traditions, but for serving as icons of traditional Mari landscape. As such they are sites of collective memory. Taboos that are connected with the sacred groves prevent people not only from violating social rules, but also from destroying the sites and abolishing the long link of historical duties that connects the present generation with the past ones. As sites of memory they remind people of obligations that they have inherited from their ancestors.

The *sürem*-ritual I attended was performed in a sacred grove (*küs-oto*) that was dedicated to the Oš Kugu Jumo (the white great god). The sacred grove of the Tjodrajal village was partly destroyed in the forties by active members of the Communist Party. 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 cornfields of a local co-operative farm, administered by seven distinct villages. No external boundaries are marked and not even expressed by behavioral taboos, especially concerning women or children. 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 that the local population had brought as votive sacrifices.

Two men who acted as sacrificial priests, called *kart* in Mari language, were helped by both elderly 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 like a novice as a sacrificial priest. The younger *kart*, not dressed in traditional ritual shoe wear and costume, recited prayers from the little booklet which were collected by ethnographers and published in Joškar-Ola in 1991 (see Popov 1991). 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 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, around the branches of which white towels were tied as a sign of the purity of the altar. After the throat of an sacrificial animal had been cut, the priests recited prayers to God.

“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! ²

Sacrificial takes place by untying the animal from the pole that is stuck on the ground. 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. Ritual slaughtering takes place by cutting the throat of the sheep and draining off its blood into a pit dug in the ground nearby the head. While the blood is draining off from the sheep's throat vessels, the *kart* holds a rope of linden-bark in his hands and wets it in the blood above the pit.

A small linden tree is erected on the ground as a sacrificial tree and as a marker of the sacred site set apart for the altar. The sacrificial *kart* takes the blooded rope of linden-bark and places it on the branches of the sacrificial tree. Women participants bring bundles of wheat bread, curd cakes and home-made honey-beer with them as they arrive at the sacred grove. They open up pastry that are wrapped around newspapers and place them on the altar. Adult participants in the ritual, including also us visitors who were there as guests, were advised to perform a candle and a coin sacrifice, to kneel down and make the sign of a cross with hands and place 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. After assistants to sacrificial priests had cooked the meat of the sacrificial animals in the cauldrons, they were brought to the altar. Addressed with the attribute *kugu* (the great) the god *Jumo* receives the souls of the sacrificed sheep, rams and geese. With 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 God's favorableness, hits the blade of his knife against the edge of the cauldron in order to tempt the god, his prophet and the messenger to visit the people. He asks the great God, “*kugu Jumo*”, to bless them with steel-like hardness, iron-like purity and chase the evil beyond the reach of

² The prayers of the sürem-ritual are translated from Mari into Finnish by the professor Finno-Ugric linguistics Sirkka Saarinen at the University of Turku. English translation is mine.

the iron's sound. On the altar, there was also a bowl where the participants in the ritual could donate coins and rubels. The money is collected for arranging future rituals.

3. The modes of operation in Mari religiosity: Explaining the ritual

After the fall of pan-soviet political ideology, the role of religion has become a central issue in Russia in general, and in respect to Mari ethnicity in particular. In addition to the Greek-Orthodox Christianity, which is the major doctrinal tradition in Russia, the religious culture of the Meadow-Mari is shaped by indigenous traditions of belief and practice blended with Turkic-Tatar elements. Notwithstanding the syncretism, the doctrinal mode is seemingly absent from the religious repertoire of the rural Meadow-Mari population. Orthodox Churches have been built mainly in regions where Russians comprise the majority of the population (Janalov 1996). Those Mari people who are recognized as *rušla vera*, Russian believers, do confess the faith of Russian Orthodoxy, but during the Soviet rule "Sundays were silent". The expression depicts hidden or destroyed church bells either by political leaders or their secret confiscation by village people for the future use. The doctrinal tradition has not played a visible role in the everyday life of the Mari, mainly for the reason that performing religious rituals were prohibited. In the mid-1990's approximately 60 percent of the Meadow-Mari population were classified as *rušla vera*. Five to seven percent are religiously committed to the indigenous systems of belief and practice and classify themselves as adherents of *nature religion*. They identify as *Ošmarij*, the white Mari. Being an *Ošmarij* is tantamount to being a *Čimarij*, one who is an adherent of the old faith and thinks of him/herself as a pure Mari (see Tojdybekova 1998, 223. < V.Šabykov & S. Isanbajev 1995:126-128).

During the 1990's, in the post-Soviet political context, the indigenous systems of belief and practice have been revived in the rural villages, but received publicity and adherence also in the cities, especially among those artists and intellectuals who have moved from the countryside and who have inherited their religious nationalism from their parents. In spite of the political control of religious matters during the Soviet rule, successful transmission of imagistic tradition seems to have taken place in the rural areas. Right before the fall of Soviet Union, the Meadow-Mari activists founded an organization called *Ošmarij-Čimarij Union* in 1991, which continues the work of *Mari ušem* (the Union of the Mari) that was founded already in 1917 in order to oppose conversions into Christianity. Principal social factors

that have influenced on the transmission of imagistic forms of the Meadow-Mari religiosity from one generation to another, and have also operated as catalysts to their renaissance, is the stability of social structure, the low rate of fertility and slow renewal of economic structure. More than 65 percent of the citizens in the Mari El (the Republic of Mari) earn their living from agriculture and forestry.

The resurgence of *sürem*-ritual is part of a larger frame of ethnopolitics that people are creating as a response to their newly gained freedom of self-expression. Nationalism and patriotism are ideologies of identification (see Jenkins 1997, 74-87; 107-123) that have replaced socialism as the single foundation on which attempts to create social cohesion were built. Subsequent to the political change, also the modes of operation that were based on the doctrinal, i.e. centralized, extensively verbalized and efficiently distributed interpretations of the state as an abstract, metaphysical entity and the position of individual citizens within its structure (in which the notion of god was held insignificant) have become altered. The ideological 'telos' of socialism to create equal access to material conditions of living for all individuals in all sections of the society has been transformed. In the competition of limited material resources, access to non-material, spiritual forces of life have become just as well important in creating conditions for better living, and in molding the modern value environment.

Psychologically the revelatory experiences of individual participants play a role, although a minor one, in the transmission of ritual traditions. In post-Soviet political context, the ritual community does not comprise only of members of a small-scale village community. There are "anonymous others" with non-local social background who also participate in the *sürem*-rituals. It is, however, in oral modes of operation in which the Mari have codified and transmitted their religious notions. To employ Whitehouse's scholarly categories, imagistic codification and transmission does not play a crucial role since animal sacrifices cannot be comprehended as an investment "to trigger enduring religious revelations" (see Whitehouse 2000: 20). Since the *sürem*-ritual is emotionally low-arousal and there is no terrifying elements represented in the sequences of the ritual, it cannot be used to support Whitehouse's theory according to which imagistic, low-frequent rituals are emotionally high-arousal (Whitehouse 2002a). The same applies to doctrinal mode of operation. As a form of folk religion, there are no such religious contents in the *sürem* ritual complex that require participants to represent their faith in theologically correct manner. However, if the notion of doctrinal mode of operation can be extended to concern also modalities of codification that are not

designed only by religious elites, e.g. doctrines which leaders of political organizations forge in order to achieve their social goals and in which ethnomythological rhetoric is an integral element, the *sürem*-sacrificial ritual can be classified as politically doctrinal. In the post-Soviet political context, ritual performances of *sürem* are becoming increasingly routinized and frequently repeated. They are positioned in the annual calendar as nationally recognized festivity. Since episodic memory plays far greater role in imagistic religious representations, it is rather semantic than episodic memory (see Whitehouse 2001 and 2002b) that constrains the codification, routinization and frequency of transmission of the *sürem* ritual complex. There is a transition period taking place in the Meadow-Mari folk religiosity. Small, rural *Ošmarij-Čimarij* communities are keeping up with the transmission of ritual traditions that they have inherited from their ancestors, but inevitably both the Russian Orthodox Church and evangelizing Protestant movements shall gain ground among the Mari population.

In post-Soviet religious and political context, the Mari represent a specific form of religious nationalism. The awareness of the Mari as an “imagined community” (see Anderson 1983, 15) is being construed to serve political purposes, in which ethnically bounded expressions of religiosity have an important role to play. Although the *sürem*-ritual is conceptually organized on the basis of Eastern Christianity, its semantic content is created by rhetoric means of its political and religious significance for the Mari national identity. By the sacrificial feast the rural community recognizes that in the course of the agricultural year there are specific temporal periods that are considered more potential than other periods as markers during which the transcendental origins of growth can be manipulated. The *sürem*-period that lasts for several days is set off from work-based social life and during which community members can express their hopes for the better balance in struggling for the individual and collective benefits of life within the larger frame of socio-economic values.

Unlike Russians who are portraying their post-Soviet cultural identity as believing Orthodox Christians, the small number of rural Meadow-Mari population is still relying on the traditional forms of folk religion. In most part, it is the membership in the category of ‘folk’ on the basis of which participation in the religious practices is determined. Low-arousal emotional ritual setting marks the dignity of their ethnoreligious tradition. The participants in the *sürem*-ritual construe their identity according to markers of ethnicity in which animal sacrifice has traditionally played a visible role. By sacrificing sheep, rams and geese in public

rituals participants mark their membership in the local *Ošmarij* political communities. In addition to the fact domestic animals have nutritional value for the Mari as renewable resources, their religious killing is motivated by the belief that God will increase their number and growth and in the same process contribute to the maintenance of the Mari society.

The Mari hold the conviction that specific animal categories contribute to their social cohesion and ethnic survival. Animals that are chosen as instruments of ritual communication are established markers of values by which participants express both their respect to the ancestral heritage and their commitment to anti-Russian sociopolitical program. Beside the Udmurts, the Mari are one of the few known people who continue to perform animal sacrifices in present-day Europe. Participation in the Nature Religion has become a political issue not only in reference with domestic politics, but also international. In addition to distinguishing the Mari way of believing from the Russian way of believing, religious rituals have gained visibility by becoming a major media attraction and drawing public attention to the Mari traditions. The role of animals as ritual agents is perceived as an expression of originality and uniqueness of Mari tradition in the context of Modern Europe, although in present-day discourse the doctrinal value of animal sacrifices as celebrated expressions of traditionalism is being questioned by animal liberation activists. Ritual practices in which the notion of God is taken to encourage killing as a sacramental act of sustaining values of life are considered unethical and as an expression of backwardness of a culture.

How we should assess the role that memory plays in the transmission of ritual traditions of the Meadow-Mari population? During the atheist political program of the Communist Party and its many-layered political control mechanisms, not only the doctrinal religious traditions suffered from the infrequency of religious transmission, but the diversity of folk religious expressions as well. Although Harvey Whitehouse posits that there is a fear that “if religious beliefs and rituals do not take the form that people can remember, they do not know anymore what to believe and how to do rituals” (Whitehouse 2002c). The *šürem*-sacrificial feast, however, proves that it is the semantic knowledge that make people competent to perform the rituals even though their overt transmission was politically inhibited. The real issue on which modes of religiosity in general and imagistic modes of operation in particular depend upon, is not the episodic recollection of emotionally high-arousal events. In Whitehouse’s theory, according to my theoretical reflection, too little attention is paid on the semantic contents of the cultural categories

that form the conceptual foundation for ethnic religious notions and ways of organizing their religious behavior. To argue for the view that religion has a cognitive grounding we do not need only to resort to the impact of revelatory experience in our episodic memory, but just as well to look for both cognitive and social causes that give rise to the recognition of the significance of specific events and episodes. Moreover, for a religion to exist, it does not need the notion of revelation. Rites of initiation and annually repeated calendar rituals are integral elements not only in any folk religious tradition, but also in literally codified and doctrinally unified religious systems as well. An anthropological understanding of the notions of 'religion' and 'religiosity' requires far more subtle tools than what the distinction between imagistic and doctrinal modes of religiosity suggests and provides. As a methodological tool, the distinction between imagistic and doctrinal modes of operation covers too narrow range of modalities or tendencies in various types of religions and religiosities that would provide us a firm conceptual foundation on which to build an adequate theory of religion.

Sources

Unpublished ethnographic material (including photos and videotapes) collected by dr. Veikko Anttonen and dr. Kaija Heikkinen of the *sürem*-ritual in the village of Tjodrajal in the Republic of Mari. July 13, 1992. The archive of the Department of Cultural Studies, University of Turku, Finland.

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