

## The Power of Porridge: Udmurt Ritual Food

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**Summary.** *This article reflects on the importance of porridge as ritual food in Udmurt ceremonies. It concentrates on village animistic ceremonies in which porridge is the final synthetic product, but also examines more intimate calendar ritual ceremonies at the level of the family. The field research was mainly carried out in Bashkortostan, where Udmurt communities have been protected from Christian influence. However, it takes into account case studies from Udmurtia and Tatarstan. The article examines the ingredients of porridge — water, grain, butter, meat — and shows how central they are to the Udmurts' life and how they have changed in recent decades. Finally, it reflects on the symbolism of porridge, from the gendered aspect of its fabrication to its suggestion of wealth and of Udmurt ethnicity.*

**Key words:** *porridge, ritual food, the Udmurt, village ceremonies.*

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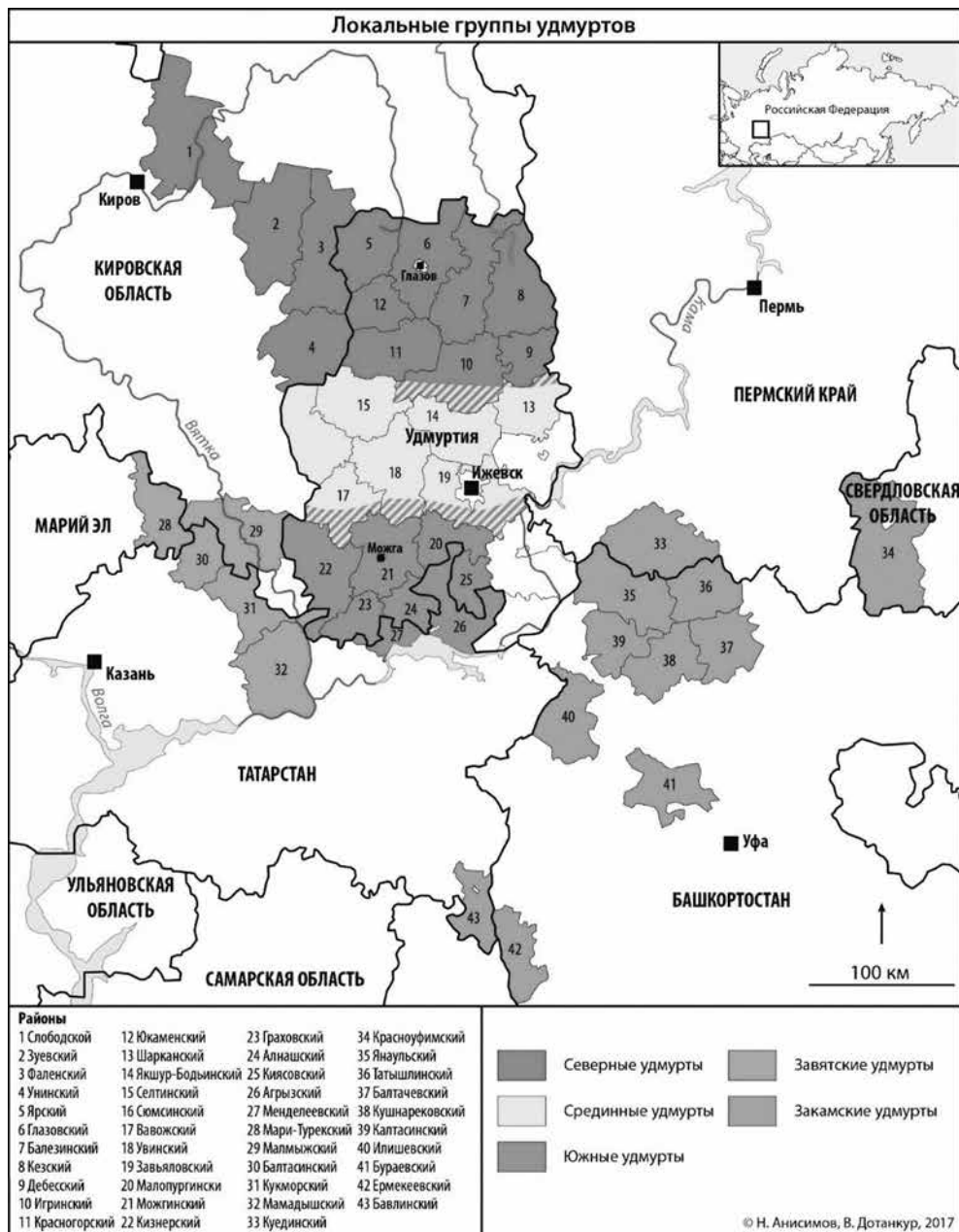
### INTRODUCTION

The Udmurts are one of the indigenous peoples of the Volga Region to whom a special territory was assigned following the 1917 revolution, now known as the Republic of Udmurtia. However, the drawing of borders left aside many groups of Udmurts who remained in other administrative units: in the southeastern part of Perm Territory; in Bashkortostan, Sverdlovsk Oblast; in Tatarstan, Kirov Oblast; and in Mari El. The Udmurts are thus separated into “ethnographic groups”<sup>1</sup> (see map), which represent a rich cultural diversity, with micro-cultures and specific cultural features within each group.

The phenomenon considered in this article — the cooking of porridge (in Udmurt

эук, *dzh'uk*) — is common to most of the Udmurts (as well as Besermyans). The research relies on fieldwork I carried out in many southern Udmurt regions (the districts of Zavyalovo, Malaya Purga, Kiyasovo, Alnashi, Agryz and Mendeleevo in Tatarstan); among Eastern Udmurts (Bashkortostan, the Kueda District in the Perm Territory); and Transvyatka Udmurts (the Kukmor District in Tatarstan). Research was also carried out in Central Udmurtia (Sharkan District) and Northern Udmurtia (Kez District) as well as in the capital, Izhevsk. Everywhere, in various contexts, I was offered porridge. In this article, I concentrate on the ritual functions of this food, both in private and public settings (see: [Popova 2017, 85–96]). First, I consider

<sup>1</sup> This is a local notion in the Russian tradition of hierarchically categorising ethnic minorities. It refers to smaller, more or less compact units, often geographically separated from the larger related ethnic group (see: [Hirsch 2005]).



[Anisimov 2017, 13]

the ritual function of porridge, how it is used in traditional collective ceremonies involving the sacrifice of animals. Then it examines porridge's various ingredients, both synchronically and diachronically, and finally reflects on several additional dimensions of this sacred food, its gender peculiarities and the symbolic values it expresses.

As is well known, practically all of the Udmurt population in the core territory has

been converted to Russian Orthodox Christianity. With one very remarkable exception (the village of Kuzebaevo in the Alnashi District, UR), all villages in Udmurtia have undergone baptism. But there are regions where Orthodoxy is less pervasive. While in some parts of Tatarstan, such as the Kukmor or Mendeleevo Districts, Christianity is well represented, in others the Udmurts have not been baptised, such as in the well-known

village of Varkled-Bodya (Aгрыз District) where they have kept alive traditional rituals (see: [Lintrop 2003; Toulouze, Anisimov 2017]). This is even more so further eastward, in Bashkortostan, as well as in the Perm Territory, where the Udmurts have been able to retain their original animist religion. The following material concentrates on public village or regional ceremonies, particularly in Bashkortostan.

### A RITUAL FOOD

Porridge is an integral part of Udmurt ritual at all levels. It is not surprising that its preparation during sacrificial ceremonies was a target for Soviet anti-religious hostility: in Bashkortostan, priests and villagers alike vividly remember brutal Communist Party interference in spring rituals. In the midst of the ceremony, Party officials would arrive and knock over the cauldrons containing the porridge, completely disrupting ritual activity [Sadikov 2019, 264].

### VILLAGE AND REGIONAL CEREMONIES

Porridge is at the core of village ceremonies and is among the most unique features of Udmurt religious practice, especially in non-Christianised areas. Porridge represents the materialisation of the ceremony, the synthetic product of communication with the deities. At regular intervals, the population of some villages — all those that are located in Bashkortostan and several other places — gathers to make a blood sacrifice to them. The common procedure is that beforehand the people, usually all of the villagers (exceptions are rare), give the organizers of the ceremony grain, butter, and money. With the money, the organizers buy the sacrificial animal. On the day of the ceremony, the priest and his assistants say prayers and conduct the ritual action, from slaughtering the animal to cooking the porridge. The villagers gather when the porridge is ready, and then eat together and pray. Every family in the village partakes of the common porridge, either at the ceremony or later at home.

This is the pattern in Bashkortostan. It is implemented with variations in other places. In Varkled-Bodya, I have attended spring initiation ceremonies in which the central product is also porridge, cooked by young men both at their initiation ceremony and at

the girls'. Other ritual actions are performed, but the culmination of both initiation rituals is a prayer; only males attend initiations for boys, while both sexes attend those for girls. The eating of the porridge takes place just after the prayer.

### HOME CEREMONIES

There are also regular ceremonies performed at home, usually in connection with calendar holidays, commemorations of the dead or more private events. As far as I have witnessed, porridge is always at the heart of these ceremonies. There may be other ritual foods as well, but porridge is always present. At the clan *vös'nerge* ritual in Varkled-Bodya (on Orthodox Easter day) porridge is the food the head of the family prays with. At the Easter festivities (*badzhynnal*) in Bashkortostan, in families that still follow traditional ways, porridge is also the food with which the head of the family prays.

### THE INGREDIENTS OF THE PORRIDGE

Whatever the nature of the ritual, the level of its religiosity or the involvement of the community, porridge always seems to be a fundamental element. What are its main ingredients? By definition, porridge is a food mainly consisting of grain boiled in water. In Bashkortostan it is important for the priest conducting the sacrifice that in the cauldron in which the porridge is going to be cooked salt is put first, before the water. I have found this to be true only for priests and at big collective ceremonies; in ordinary households, the women who do the cooking are not aware of this rule and have even never heard of it. This is nothing to be surprised about, for ceremonial etiquette is not a female field. Moreover, lay people are not present at the start of the ceremonial action.

Why this rule about salt? It was very difficult to get an answer to this question. The most frequent response was “because the elder did so”; this is reason enough. The priests are not particularly interested in why something has to be done, but on how it must be done. Mistakes, as the elder priest Nazip Sadriev explained, are dangerous and may ruin the ceremony<sup>2</sup>.

The ceremonies require lots of water: at the very beginning, it is used to clean tables and

<sup>2</sup> <http://komanda-k.ru/node/4921/>

cauldrons, then a constant supply is needed for tea, to fill the cauldrons to cook the meat and to replace evaporation, and later to clean up, not to mention the need to wash hands and money for the sacrifice. Hence fetching water — together with cutting wood — is one of the continual activities performed by helpers during the ceremonies. To be accurate, the porridge is cooked not in water but in broth: the sacrificed animal is placed into boiling water in order to make the broth in which the cereals will be cooked.

During ceremonies, water comes from a nearby spring or waterway. Usually sacred places are located near water, and as water is continually needed during a ceremony, it is good not to have to go very far. In the villages of Bal'zyuga, Alga, Yuda (Tatyshly District, RB), for example, there is a spring very close to the sacred place, in fact just below it. In Urazgil'de, a spring is located within the sacred space. In Novye Tatyshly, although the water source is not far away, the custom is to bring water from the village in a horse cart. In other districts water may be close by (Kizganbashevo Village, Baltachevo District; Asavka Village, Buraevo District); but in other cases big containers with hundreds of liters are brought to the spot in trucks (Kirga Village, Kueda District, Perm Territory). In Nizhnebaltachevo (Tatyshly District), although the source was close to the sacred space, it was deemed too far and in June 2019 the place was changed for one even closer to the water (Garifulla Garifullovich Garifanov, born 1947, Nizhnebaltachevo Village, Tatyshly District, RB. Coll. ET, LN, LV, NA, RS, EB. June 2019). Thus, water is always an issue. Water from a spring, i.e. natural water, is always preferred.

Cereals are both physically and symbolically a crucial ingredient in ritual porridge. Physically, because they represent a large percent of the ingredients used in its preparation; and symbolically, because cereals represent the population of the village, i.e. the community. All households in the village contribute<sup>3</sup>. Each village has its own tradition of gathering cereals. The collectors are either young teenagers (such as in Malaya Bal'zyuga), women (such as in Petropavlovka Village, Tatyshly District, RB), or older men.

Formerly, various cereals were used (FW 2013). Only two were explicitly prohibited: buckwheat, because the grain is dark and the ceremonies address the white heavenly god — at least, this is the canonical explanation we have been given; and peas, unwelcome because they are spherical and are supposed to summon hail (according to Nazip Sadriev, born 1930, Malaya Bal'zyuga, Tatyshly District, RB. Coll. ET, LV, RS. June 2013). Sometimes, when hail falls after the ceremony, people argue that somebody has put peas in the porridge. All other cereals are accepted.

Indeed, at the beginning of the decade all kinds of grain were used: wheat, oats, (pearl) barley (the longest to cook), rye, and rice<sup>4</sup>. In some places, the opening prayer asking for the acceptance of the sacrifice is accompanied by semolina porridge, which is quick to cook and prepared without meat (FW, Alga Village, Tatyshly District, RB. Coll. ET, LN, RS. June 2013). In recent years, the trend is to decrease the variety of grains. The use of barley is substantially reduced, probably because of the length of cooking (FW, Novye Tatyshly, Tatyshly District, RB. Coll. ET, LN, RS. June 2013). While at big ceremonies there is still some variety, most homemade ritual porridges I have seen and tasted are made of rice. Rice seems to outnumber other types of grain.

The other main ingredient deserving mention is butter. While in some villages those who collect ingredients have ceased to include butter, in many others it is still an important part of the preparation of the porridge. Big chunks of homemade or store-bought butter are thrown into the cauldrons to melt, ensuring the porridge's nutritional qualities. The risky thing about butter is that a portion of damaged butter may spoil a whole cauldron, as happened in Nizhnebaltachevo in 2016. Trust that villagers will contribute quality products has since decreased.

### PORRIDGE WITHOUT MEAT

Porridge without meat is a rare ritual food. I have seen it only in only one situation: for the first prayer of the village ceremony called *sizis'kon* — which promises an animal sacrifice and appeals to the deities to accept the

<sup>3</sup> While it is not possible to argue with total certitude that all the village dwellers always contribute, there are very few villagers who never participate, e.g. one or two elderly women often labelled as witches.

<sup>4</sup> Pasta may also be put into the porridge [Popova 2017, 88].

offering. As the prayer takes place before the sacrifice, it is logical that no sacrificial meat is yet part of the porridge's ingredients. In my experience, this porridge is composed either of the same grains that will be used later, or, in the Alga group, of semolina. In Asavka, they use a special recipe with flour, which turns this particular porridge into something like a white sauce (*béchamel*) (Vladimir Galiev, born 1971, Asavka Village, Baltachevo District, RB. Coll. ET, NA, RS. June 2016). However, in many places where ceremonies have been discontinued at some time, during the Soviet era, this particular prayer is now absent from ritual practice.

### MEAT FOR BROTH AND PORRIDGE

What kind of meat is used for cooking the broth and then added to the porridge? Depending on the ceremony and its goal, the sacrificial animal may differ. Over the decades there have been changes in the choice of the sacrificial animal, depending on the system of breeding, on the animals available, and on the forms of husbandry.

### EVOLUTION OF ANIMAL USE

#### The kolkhoz era

Collectivization introduced changes in the choice of animal used for sacrifice. Big cattle came under state ownership, meaning that there was now external control over their use. As the Soviet authorities were hostile to religion, the use of state property for "idle" sacrifices became impossible. The choice of animal also depended on the kolkhoz management and on the specific moment, the personality and the nationality of the authorities<sup>5</sup>. Cattle and horses were replaced for sacrifice by smaller animals, which, at least in the post-war period, villagers could own themselves.

#### Changes in production

In the first part of the twentieth century, horses were bred abundantly, especially in regions also inhabited by Tatars or Bashkirs, who eat horsemeat. In recent decades, most horse farms have closed. As they are difficult to afford, horses have practically ceased to be sacrificial animals<sup>6</sup>.

There have been recent rituals with big animal sacrifices for the commemoration of dead parents, such as *ulen van'don* in Vot'skaya Osh'ya, Yanaul District, Bashkortostan, and *yur-pyd soton* in Southern Udmurtia and the Agryz District of Tatarstan. It has become easier now to sacrifice a cow in commemoration of one's dead mother and a bull to honor one's father. However, in rituals where the sacrificial animal was formerly a horse, they have been replaced by two geese (in order to have four legs, as these are part of the ritual) (Arkadii Urakbaev, Vot'skaya Osh'ya Village, Yanaul District. Coll. ET, LN, RS. November 2015). Today it is also common to buy the needed parts of the animal without ritual slaughtering. This has started to happen in Udmurtia for *yur-pyd soton*, the "giving of the head and the feet," for which the family buys the head and the feet of a cow or bull (oral information by NA, 2018).

#### Animal husbandry

Today families do not keep geese year round; they buy chicks in spring from commercial incubators and they feed them during the summer. The fully grown animal is slaughtered in autumn and its meat frozen. Thus people do not need to feed geese during the winter. While Udmurt villages in summer look as they always have, with gaggles of geese scurrying about, the reality behind the appearance has radically changed. For rituals taking place in spring there are no geese available for sacrifice. This has led to changes in some ceremonies. For example, in Bashkortostan, traditionally in the village spring ceremonies *gurt vös'*, a goose was sacrificed along with ewes (Nazip Sadriev, see above. Coll. ET, LN, LV. June 2014). This is no longer possible, for when the ceremony is held, there are no adult geese in the villages to sacrifice (Liliya Garaeva, born 1954, Aribash Village, Tatyshly District, TB. Coll. ET, LN, LV. June 2014).

### SACRIFICIAL MEAT TODAY

#### Pork

Some animals can never be used for sacrifice. For unspecified reasons, pork, while used in

<sup>5</sup> We have heard that, especially in the last Soviet decades, kolkhozes sometimes gave animals for Udmurt sacrifice, as their ceremonies were thought to bring rain.

<sup>6</sup> While Popova mentions horse meat as one of the meats used for broth by the Besermyan, I have never seen any ritual porridge with horsemeat and never heard of such it either in Bashkortostan or Udmurtia (I have no experience of Northern Udmurtia) [Popova 2017, 87].

everyday cooking, is excluded from sacrificial use (as it is also prohibited by the Besermians [Popova 2017, 87]). This is probably due to the influence of the Muslim environment, where pork is forbidden. Nevertheless, in some cases the Udmurts may use pork in sacrificial ceremonies. For example, for the initiation rituals in Varkled-Bodya, in which the boys and later the girls collect meat from villagers, they have two buckets for meat: one in which they put mutton, goose, duck or beef, and the other for pork and chicken. There are also two cauldrons; the pork and chicken, not meant for the prayer, go into the second cauldron, whose porridge is fed to the ordinary population (FW, Varkled-Bodya Village, Agryz District, RT. Coll. NA, ET. April 2017).

### Chicken

Chicken is not used for routine ceremonies, but only for commemoration of the dead [Anisimov 2017, 208]. The Udmurts say that hens scratch the soil backwards, which symbolically connects them to the world of the dead. Thus, the use of chicken is strictly limited, and I have not witnessed any preparation of porridge out of chicken broth.

The most common sacrificial animals are the following:

### Sheep

Sheep are the main sacrificial animal in the largest ceremonies of the non-baptised Udmurts in Bashkortostan. All of the spring ceremonies, as far as I have witnessed, involve the sacrifice of one or more sheep. However, the status of the sheep may vary. In the places where continuity is assured, the rule is to sacrifice a ewe. The animal must be healthy and have given birth at least once. While in places where the ritual proceeds in the most traditional way this is an absolute rule, it is not followed everywhere. Most places where ceremonies have been revitalised use rams for the same purpose (in the Yanaul district of Bashkortostan, for example). Nevertheless, even in places where ceremonies have never been discontinued, the priests argue that non-castrated rams are compulsory: the sacrificial animal must never have shed blood, which clearly does not apply to ewes that have given birth (Kaimashabash Village, Yanaul District) (FW, Kaimashabash Village, Yanaul

District, RB. Coll. ET. July 2019). So here we have conflicting rules, seemingly both traditional, from competing local traditions.

Another feature in which traditions differ is the way one obtains sacrificial animals. In the Tatyshly District, ewes are bought from villagers. In other places, like Kizganbashevo (Baltachevo District, RB), or in the case of Keremet ceremonies (Votskaya Osh'ya Village, Yanaul District, RB), sacrificial animals are provided free of charge (Timerkhan Apsalikov, born 1952, Kizganbashevo Village, Baltachevo District, RB. Coll. ET, RS. June 2016). The donors hope for the attention and protection of the gods and may have their own reasons for making an offering. In Kizganbashevo, there have been up to twelve ewes to sacrifice. If nobody donates a ewe or money for meat, the ceremony will go on with prayers but without meat, but this seems to be a moot issue since (according to a priest) this has not yet happened. According to the priests of Tatyshly, it is unhealthy to sacrifice donated animals, for then the benefit of the ceremony will go exclusively to the donors. In order for the whole village to get advantage from the ceremony, it must have animals purchased with money provided by the villagers themselves (Nazip Sadriev, see above. Coll. ET, RS. June 2015).

### Geese and ducks

These animals are the main sacrificial animals in certain ceremonies. Geese are sacrificed more often formerly than nowadays. While their meat may be used in making porridge, it cannot be used for blood sacrifice during winter into summer because it has already been frozen. For rituals taking place in autumn and winter, some birds may be sacrificed either as main sacrifice or before it. In the case of the Votskaya Osh'ya Keremet ceremony, two geese were sacrificed; the priest killed the birds and their wives butchered them (FW, Votskaya Osh'ya Village, Yanaul District, RB. Coll. ET, LN, RS. November 2015; Toulouze, Niglas 2016). For the winter village ceremony in Novye Tatyshly in 2016, the priest slaughtered a goose "for the health of all the birds in the world" (FW, Novye Tatyshly, RB. Coll. ET, LN, NA, RS), at the very beginning of the ritual. This sacrifice had not been performed for years. There are other cases of geese being sacrificed, for example for the *kuala*<sup>7</sup> *kuris*/*kon/pyron*, still

<sup>7</sup> The sanctuary of the Udmurts, their only building with religious relevance [Vladykin 1994, 289].

held in Altaevo (Buraevo District, Bashkortostan), although the *kuala* itself no longer exists (FW, Altaevo Village, Buraevo District, RB. Coll. LN, RS. April 2018).

### Beef

Some families own cows or bulls. Some years ago, most families had at least a cow, used for milk. Now many have given up: older people have no strength left, younger people often have jobs that are too demanding to deal with a cow, especially women. Some still keep a bull for some months, just to ensure meat for the winter (Mars Sabiryavovich Samigulov, Novye Tatyshly Village, Tatyshly District, RB. Coll. ET. August 2019). In these families, beef is the main meat from which ordinary broth is prepared for porridge. As mentioned above, there are rituals in which bovines are compulsory, especially the last commemoration for dead parents. This takes place some years after the death of the parent and requires the offering of the head and legs of a cow for the mother, and a horse (or two geese) for the father. This ceremony, *yyr-pyd s'oton*, was also performed in southern Udmurt areas during the Soviet period, but it has known a new life in the last decade and is performed more often.

Beef may be used as additional meat in ceremonies. If, during a big ceremony in Bashkortostan, the sacrificial meat is not sufficient, additional beef meat will be added to the cauldrons (Fridman Vladimirovich Kabipyanov, see above. Coll. ET, LN, RS. June 2013).

### THE SACRIFICE

The sacrifice is the core of a sacrificial ceremony. The participants in such a ceremony are mainly the sacrificial priest(s) and their assistants. Formerly, these helpers had well-defined functions: one (the *tylas'*) looked after the fire; another (the *partchas'*) looked after the slaughtering, a third was the so-called sacrificial priest (the *vös'as'*), who uttered the prayers [Sadikov 2019, 241]. Today, the roles are more randomly distributed, except for the sacrificial priest, who leads the ceremony by saying the prayers aloud. The others fulfil all the other necessary tasks.

Two helpers perform the ritual slaughtering. First the animal is brought forth. One of

the helpers holds him — this is important, for everyone has stories of running after runaway sheep. Usually, however, the sheep do not put up a fight and submit meekly to their fate. Meanwhile, the other sprays the sacrificial animal with water. He symbolically “washes” all of its body. Then they push the animal into a lying position. The helper who cuts its throat does it through a twig of birch (or grass, depending on the place). This is the general practice in ordinary situations (oral information NA). We have asked for the reasons. One of the alleged reasons is that in this way the slaughterer hides his “murder”: he just cut a twig! (FW, Urazgil'de Village, Tatyshly District, RB. Coll. NA. June 2019).

In the most traditional communities, the slaughtering takes place while the priest is saying a prayer. For many, it is inconceivable to slaughter an animal without prayer: the prayer is indeed what distinguishes a sacrifice from ordinary slaughter for meat. However, where the ritual has been reduced and there is one single prayer said with the meat porridge, the animal is slaughtered without any prayer. These divergent practices came into sharp focus in 2019 at the common ceremony (*elen vös'*) held that year in Staryi Varyash, Yanaul District. Both Anatoli Galikhanov from Altaevo (Buray District), now the most respected sacrificial priest in Bashkortostan, and the head of the priests' association, and Rais Rafikov, the priest of Novye Tatyshly, were very much disturbed by seeing their colleagues slaughtering without prayer. Spontaneously, Galikhanov started a prayer. Later, he encouraged Rafikov to do the same and he himself knelt behind the older man (FW, Staryi Varyash, Yanaul District, RB. Coll. ET. June 2019).

Washed parts of the animal are thrown into the cauldrons full of boiling water. Ideally, all of the meat is used. The right side of the animal must be identified: it is the one that the priest will choose to pray with.

The entrails, however, may be treated in various ways. If there are women available, they clean them<sup>8</sup>. If no women are available to do this, they throw the entrails into the fire, like other rubbish. After that, a long period of waiting starts until the meat in the cauldron is cooked. This is a quiet interval. The men interact, drink tea, and count the collected

<sup>8</sup> They may do it at home or in a nearby stream, making sure to go downstream, out of sight of the sacred place (FW, Asavka Village, Baltachevo District, RB. Coll. ET, NA, RS. June 2016).



Pouring the grain, village ceremony (Verkhnebaltachevo Village, Tatyshly District, Bashkortostan). Photo by the author, 2019

Пересыпание зерна во время деревенского обряда (с. Верхнебалтачево, Татышлинский р-н, Башкортостан). Фото автора, 2019 г.

money; it is an important time of male socialisation, while slowly the villagers, usually elder women, arrive. When the meat is ready, the sacrificial priest chooses the parts with which he is going to pray — the vitals (heart, liver), meat from the right side of the animal, part of the head. After the prayer, the

priest eats part of the meat while praying, and shares it with the helpers.

### THE PORRIDGE PROPER

Now the activities are divided into two parts: one group of helpers sorts the meat, separating it from the bones. They put the bones



The distribution of the porridge, village ceremony (Malaya Balzuga Village, Tatyshly District, Bashkortostan). Photo by L. Vallikivi, 2014

Раздача каши во время деревенского обряда (с. Малая Бальзуга, Татышлинский р-н, Башкортостан). Фото Л. Валликиви, 2014 г.





One of the prayers (*mör vös'*) (Alga Village, Tatyshly District, Bashkortostan). Photo by R. Sadikov, 2013  
 Одно из молений (*мөр вöсь*) (с. Алга, Татышлинский р-н, Башкортостан). Фото Р. Садикова, 2013 г.

in a special bucket that they give to the elder women who have attended, and who gnaw the last meat from them. Afterwards the bones go into the fire. The other group of helpers pours grain into the broth and as soon as the porridge comes to a boil, they mix it so that it won't stick. It will take a while until the mixture is well cooked. When the porridge is soft, the other team mixes the meat into it. The porridge is then shared among the people attending the ceremony, who eat it on the spot.

This is the way things are done in the Tatyshly District. In other districts, the meat may be served separately from the porridge. Allegedly, this was also the way until not so long ago in Tatyshly District, as the elder sacrificial priest Nazip Sadriev told us. But when he discovered that this method of serving gave some villagers the opportunity to grab all of the meat, leaving others with none, he made the change. By mixing porridge and meat he hoped that everybody would have roughly an equal share of meat. In Asavka (Baltachevo District) and in Kaimashabash (Yanaul District) meat is also served separately.

There are different traditions for distributing the porridge. In some places, the priest calls for people to enter the sacred space (Aribash Village, Tatyshly District). In others, the people do not enter the fenced-off part of the sacred area, and the priest hands them porridge over the fence (Alga, Vil'gurt).

In other cases there isn't an internal fence and people queue directly in front of the cauldron (Bal'zyuga, Urazgilde, Vyazovka, etc.); in yet another scenario, a helper brings the porridge to the waiting people in buckets (Kachak, Kaimashabash). The people waiting may stand in circles of kinfolk (Kachak, Kaimashabash) or queue in front of the cauldron, usually with a single container from which all the kin will eat. Before taking the first mouthful, each person prays, usually silently.

This is the rule in most of the Bashkortostan ceremonies, although there may be other models. In Asavka and in Varkled-Bodya, the containers are left in a precise spot — in Asavka in front of a pole where towels hang, in Varkled-Bodya under a big fir tree. When the porridge is ready, the helpers (or the boys preparing the porridge) fill the containers, and then everyone retrieves his or her own.

At the ceremony, the participants must respect some general rules, for which I have not noticed variations. Both men and women have their heads covered as well as their arms and legs. Children in shorts are sent back home to dress (FW, Nizhnebaltachevo, Tatyshly District, RB, 2016). Usually the ceremonies take place on Fridays, which is a working day<sup>9</sup>, so that a system is organized to allow everyone to partake. At home, the porridge is also eaten with covered heads, and with prayers. The family is supposed to eat all of it. If any porridge remains, it may

<sup>9</sup> But not always. Sometimes they may take place on Sunday (Kaimashabash) and in some cases on random days (Asavka) or on other fixed days (Varkled-Bodya, Kuzebaev).

not be given to the livestock. It must be given to the dog, which is an animal connected with the world of the ancestors [Vladykin 1994, 168–169].

The porridge epitomises the core of the ceremony: it contains the community principle, for it is made of ingredients that come from the community — meat bought with money donated by the community, grain given by the community, water from the communal spring, etc. But at every stage, through prayers and sacrifice, it is dedicated to the main Udmurt God, Inmar. The pre-sacrifice porridge is without meat and starts the whole procedure. Then comes the sacrifice, marked by a prayer. Then the meat is cooked, producing broth, then another prayer with meat in the priest's hands, and then, last, a prayer over the money given by the attendees of the ceremony. From the very beginning, prayers during the cooking of the porridge strengthen what I understand to be the porridge's magical power. In simpler ceremonies, the mere fact that the priest prays with the porridge in his hands gives it the same kind of magical power. By absorbing its substance, the community joins in the address to the gods and gains the benefit of their protection. Thus the main religious action is enacted through the eating of the porridge.

### PORRIDGE IN SMALLER RITUALS

Porridge for home sacrifice is cooked at home, in the kitchen, usually on a gas stove. I have never come across porridge presented with meat at smaller calendar rituals. Usually the dishes are put out on the table separately, the meat in separate bowls and the porridge, cooked in its broth, in other containers. Often the porridge is displayed in a very simple but striking form, similar to what Popova observed of the Besermyan [Popova 2017, 88]: in the middle, there is a hole filled with a yellow fatty liquid — fat from the cooking of the meat, butter, or even vegetable oil (Nizhnebaltachevo, Urazgil'dy). This seems to suggest a symbolic sun. However, some families serve the porridge without any decoration (Vyazovka).

One of the family ceremonies that requires porridge is the “autumn ceremony” in Bashkortostan (in Udmurt, *siz'yl kuris'kon*) (see [Toulouze 2018]). The family gathers around the table while the father takes the porridge prepared by his wife on a towel and goes to a place outside the house — a veranda or the

courtyard — to pray. Then he comes back to the family, eats a mouthful of porridge and blesses the family; his wife and by the rest of the family then partakes (Nizhnebaltachevo, Urazgil'de, Vyazovka). A reduced version of this ritual sees the head of the household saying some words more or less similar to a prayer at the table (Novye Tatyshly).

During the ritual if not at the very beginning, all participants around the table have their heads covered. While elder women commonly use headscarves, younger ones who may not be accustomed to them still wear them while sitting at the table. Similarly, men who had been sitting bareheaded waiting for the food to be ready, take headgear from their pockets when the time comes.

The same principle is respected in the case of the “Great Day” (*badzhynnal*), a ritual marking the beginning of the year and held when Christians celebrate Easter. Nowadays, in Bashkortostan, this ritual is more or less alive, depending on the region. In the Tatyshly District, this is very much the case, although not in the neighbouring district of Yanaul. But the memory is still alive even there: in 2018, a public event was held in Banibash, a small village in the Yanaul District, in which the ritual was enacted on a stage and porridge offered to attendees after a concert by local folk ensembles. While many rituals cease to be actively performed in the villagers' lives, they are remembered and performed on the stage by the local folklore ensembles. This is the rule in Udmurtia, where Evangelisation has led to the vanishing of many traditional rituals, which are more and more often enacted on stage. In Bashkortostan, it is not the rule at the moment.

Something akin to this ceremony is the *vös' nerge* ritual in Varkled-Bodya [Anisimov, Toulouze 2018]. This family rite retains many archaic features, like the custom of visiting all the members of the kin group one after another, which is known to have existed everywhere but has now disappeared in most places [Sadikov 2019, 132, 145, 248–249]. All the wives prepare porridge with goose. In one group, the head of the household goes into the yard and prays with the porridge. After praying, he goes back into the house, the family stands up, and he tastes the porridge, followed by his wife and his children and the other kin gathered around the table.

In another group the head of the household prays at home. The participants commented

that the custom of praying outside is said to have probably begun during WWII, when older men were mobilised and only youngsters remained at home. A story is told about a shy and insecure young man who did not dare pray in front of everybody, and so took the porridge into the courtyard. He felt a need to relieve himself and went to the toilet, leaving the porridge on the ground. When he came back, the hens (others said the dog) had eaten the porridge. This episode may have led some to think that praying in the courtyard, or in any case, outside the house, was the rule (Ryurik Kirillov, born 1953, Varkled-Bodya Village, Agryz District, RT. Coll. NA, ET. April 2017).

## SOME SYNTHETIC OBSERVATIONS

### Porridge and gender

Dealing with porridge is an action marked by gender. In general, Udmurt ceremonies are a male activity. Curiously, in the Kaltasy District, the sacrificial priest defines it more as a female activity, as the attendants are mainly women. Indeed, the Kaltasy District is remarkable for allowing lots of space to women: most of the helpers are women and they are present from the very beginning of the ritual. But this is an exception in the larger rule. In general, women take charge of only two activities: cleaning the cauldrons at the very beginning, and cleaning the entrails of the slaughtered animals.

It is interesting that, while women in ordinary life are the ones who do the cooking, in ritual matters positions are reversed. In Varkled-Bodya boys prepare the porridge not only at their own initiations, but at the girls' too. At home, for home rituals, the wives are the ones who cook, while in community ceremonies it is the men.

### Porridge as symbol of wealth

Popova describes the Besermyan porridge as a "symbol of wealth, increase, integrity" [Popova 2017, 93]. During my fieldwork, I have not encountered such meta-comments about porridge. Porridge does not seem to be discussed at the emic level as anything other than an element of continuity between contemporary practice and what the elders did and how they did it. Nevertheless, Popova does not present this idea as being an emic understanding either. At the level of etic analysis, I agree with her. My opinion relies on something on which I commented in this

article: the use of butter in the porridge. One might say that butter always better the taste and the consistency of the food to which it is added. While I may agree intuitively with this assertion, I find it difficult to consider it relevant in this case. Even without butter, porridge cooked in meat broth, especially mutton and goose meat, is already very fatty. Is the addition of butter necessary from the point of view of flavour? This is dubious, since the taste of meat overpowers that of the butter. Does the consistency change with the addition of butter? It might with porridge made with other, leaner meat. The only justification I find for the addition of butter is the concentration of rich ingredients, which indeed represent, symbolically, wealth and increase.

### Porridge as a symbol of Udmurtness

As ethnographic material shows, porridge is the central element in many Udmurt rituals. I have examined its place in rituals connected to Udmurt traditional practice; I could continue with a discussion of porridge's presence in other mass events. Porridge has become a symbol in Udmurt culture that represents Udmurtness and sacredness at the same time. It is present not only in rituals, but also in different kinds of Udmurt events, such as village days, village calendar events. Such is the celebration of the end of spring field work, called variously, depending on the regions, *gerber* (Udmurtia), *gyron bydton* (some regions of Southern Udmurtia and Tatarstan) or *sabantui* (some regions in RT, RB) [Shutova 2020, Sadikov 2020]. These large gatherings have become symbols of Udmurtness, and porridge is always a part of it, more or less at the center of activities. As a fundamental food in everyday life as well as in rituals, porridge carries great ethnic significance. It is not the only food to do this, but it is one of them; we could also mention *pel'men* (dumplings), *taban'* (pancakes), *perepech* (filled dough baskets). However, porridge is a particularly powerful case in that it also suggests the sacred. Thus, in reflecting on porridge, we touch not only upon a staple fare but also a central symbol of Udmurt self-representation.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, we focused on one distinct sacred food. Porridge is not the only one in the Udmurt tradition, and other foods play sacred roles in several different rituals.

Porridge plays a ritual function in various contexts, including both public ceremonies and home and family practices. Its preparation has many stable features although its main ingredients — grain and meat — may

vary. At the same time, porridge has a larger, symbolic function as a representation of richness and of Udmurt identity, and for this reason figures in more contexts than in religious ceremonies alone.

### Fieldwork: ritual documentation and filming

- July 2011 — Kuzebaev Village, Alnashi District, UR — St. Peter's day ceremony (ET)  
 June 2013 — Novye Tatyshly Village, Tatyshly District, RB — *mör vös'* (ET, LN, RS)  
 — Alga Village, Tatyshly District, RB — *mör vös'*  
 — Kirga Village, Kueda District, Perm Territory — *elen vös'*  
 Dec. 2013 — Kyzyl-Yar Road, Tatyshly District, RB — *tol bagysh vös'* (ET, LN)  
 — Alga Village, Tatyshly district, RB — *tol mör vös'*  
 June 2014 — Bal'zyuga Village, Tatyshly District, RB — *gurt vös'* (ET, LN, LV)  
 — Urazgil'de Village, Tatyshly District, RB — *gurt vös'*  
 — Novye Tatyshly Village, Tatyshly District, RB — *mör vös'*  
 June 2015 — Aribash Village, Tatyshly District, RB — *gurt vös'* (ET, RS)  
 — Kyzyl-Yar Road, Tatyshly District, RB — *bagysh vös'*  
 Nov. 2015 — Votskaya Osh'ya Village, Yanaul District, RB — *lud vös'* (ET, LN, RS)  
 June 2016 — Nizhnebaltachevo/Alga Village, Tatyshly District, RB — *gurt vös'* (ET, NA, RS)  
 — Asavka Village, Baltachevo District, RB — *mör vös'*  
 Dec. 2016 — Novye Tatyshly Village, Tatyshly District, RB — *tol mör vös'* (ET, LN, RS)  
 Apr. 2017 — Varkled-Bodya Village, Agryz District, RT — *eru karon, shaytan ullyan, akashka, vös' nerge* (ET, NA)  
 June 2017 — Vyazovka Village, Tatyshly District, RB — *gurt vös'* (ET, NA, LV, RS)  
 — Verkhnie Tatyshly Village, Tatyshly District, RB — *gurt vös'*  
 Oct. 2017 — Novye Tatyshly Village, Tatyshly District, RB — *siz'yl kuris'kon* (ET, LN, NA, RS)  
 — Nizhnebaltachevo Village, Tatyshly District, RB — *siz'yl kuris'kon*  
 — Vyazovka Village, Tatyshly District, RB — *siz'yl kuris'kon*  
 — Aribash Village, Tatyshly District, RB — *vyl' korka pyron*  
 Apr. 2018 — Novye Tatyshly Village, Tatyshly District, RB — *badzh'ynnal* (ET, LN, LV, MV)  
 — Tatyshly District, RB — *salam s'iyon*  
 — Tatyshly District, RB — *vyl' kenak pyrton*  
 — Altaevo Village, Burai District, RB — *kuala pyron*  
 June 2018 — Bol'shoi Kachak Village, Kaltasy District, RB — *badzhyn vös'* (ET)  
 — Starokalmiyarovo/Petropavlovka Village, Tatyshly District, RB — *gurt vös'*  
 June 2019 — Staryi Varyash Village, Yanaul District, RB — *elen vös'* (ET)  
 — Verkhnebaltachevo Village, Tatyshly District, RB — *gurt vös'*  
 — Nizhnebaltachevo Village, Tatyshly District, RB — *vös' inty*

### Abbreviations

- EB — Evgenii Badredtinov  
 ET — Eva Toulouze  
 FW — Fieldwork  
 LN — Liivo Niglas  
 LV — Laur Vallikivi  
 MV — Mariya Vyatshina  
 NA — Nikolai Anisimov  
 RB — Republic of Bashkortostan  
 RS — Ranus Sadikov  
 RT — Republic of Tatarstan  
 UR — Udmurt Republic

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## Сила каши: удмуртское ритуальное блюдо

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**Аннотация.** Автор размышляет о главенствующей роли каши в ритуальных трапезах удмуртов. При этом он опирается на свои многолетние полевые исследования, проведенные главным образом в Башкортостане, где удмурты проживают компактно и не подверглись христианскому влиянию, а также на наблюдения в Удмуртии и Татарстане. Задействованы комментарии респондентов, зафиксированные непосредственно в ритуальном процессе. Рассматриваются деревенские общинные моления, где каша является своеобразным завершением, окончательным синтезированным результатом ритуальных действий. Не игнорируются более интимные обряды, проводимые на уровне семьи или рода по поводу календарных или семейных праздников.

**Ключевые слова:** каша, ритуальная еда, удмурты, деревенские обряды.

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## КРАТКОЕ СОДЕРЖАНИЕ

Статья рассказывает о ритуальной функции каши у удмуртов и описывает, как это блюдо используется в традиционных коллективных молениях. Детально рассматриваются используемые для каши ингредиенты, их происхождение и значение. Почти все они являются видом жертвований членами деревенской общины: каждый двор дает крупу и сливочное масло, обетное жертвенное животное покупается на собранные деньги. Важным ингредиентом каши является вода, роль которой в молениях многостороння. Ее берут из родника, близкого к священному месту моления, либо приносят или привозят из отдаленных мест. В статье подробно описывается, как крупу собирают со всех членов сообщества, какой вид крупы наиболее значим. Есть запреты, связанные с внешним видом крупы — ее формой и цветом. Наблюдаются предпочтения в пользу риса. Выбор жертвенного животного для приготовления ритуальной каши существенно изменился в последние десятилетия. Это связано с преобразованиями, коснувшимися удмуртского животноводства (коневодства теперь практически нет, гусей круглогодично

не держат), анализ которого требует отдельного обзора. Если в начале XX в., как известно из литературы, для жертвы использовали крупных животных, то теперь их часто заменяют на более доступных овец, гусей и уток. Приведены запреты на употребление одного или другого типа мяса. Рассматривается также технология приготовления и презентации каши в разных местах. Те же аспекты разбираются и в отношении каши, которую делают для более интимных обрядов. Анализируется гендерный аспект: поскольку процесс моления — прерогатива мужчин, здесь они занимаются делом, в обыденной жизни являющимся женским занятием.

В статье говорится о символическом значении каши. Прежде всего, она ассоциируется с богатством, которое просят у богов. Дополнительные коннотации при этом несет на себе масло, обильно добавляемое в котел в уже готовую ритуальную еду. Также можно сказать, что каша является символом удмуртской этничности, поскольку она занимает центральное место не только на общинных молениях по случаю календарных празднеств, но и на других торжествах удмуртов.

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