

## **Udmurtia: Orthodoxy, Paganism, Authority**

SERGEI FILATOV & ALEKSANDR SHCHIPKOV

In Udmurtia, as in other Finno-Ugrian republics in the Volga region, the revival of paganism is inseparably connected with the national movement. This link was fore-ordained by the relative liveliness of paganism in the republic.

Christianity began to penetrate the Udmurt milieu in the thirteen to fourteenth centuries, first of all into the northern regions of traditional Udmurt settlements together with the first Russian settlers. However, the greater part of the Udmurt people was under strong Turkic Muslim pressure until the destruction of the Khanate of Kazan'. Over the centuries the Udmurts offered resistance to Turkic expansion. The southern Udmurts, who formed part of the realm of the Volga Bulgars, and later of the Golden Horde and the Khanate of Kazan', experienced especially strong Muslim influence; it is not surprising that their northern fellow-tribesmen called them the 'Tatar Udmurts'. However, Islam could not supplant the Udmurts' traditional beliefs, and up to the time of the fall of the Khanate of Kazan' the great majority of them remained pagans.

The first recorded date in the spread of Christianity is 1557, when Ivan the Terrible conferred certain privileges on 17 baptised Udmurt families by an imperial deed. However, serious attempts to draw the 'Vyatka non-Russians' into the bosom of Orthodoxy were undertaken only in the middle of the eighteenth century, when the government began to implement a whole series of measures to christianise the Udmurts: missionaries were sent into the villages and began to build churches and open schools. In 1740 an 'office for the affairs of neophytes' was created in the Volga region. However, until the middle of the nineteenth century christianisation took place mainly by political means. Pagans were repressed, and sacred groves, prayer sites and pagan burial grounds were destroyed.

Christianisation proceeded slowly and superficially. Only in 1818 was a biblical committee set up in Vyatka, into which Udmurt priests were recruited as translators. From 1819 to 1823 the four gospels were translated into Udmurt. The work of publishing and enlightenment became especially active with the organisation of the Brotherhood of St Guri in Kazan' in 1867.

There are no such striking examples of resistance to Christianity recorded among the Udmurts as the movement of the 'Mordovian god Kuz'ka' among the Erzya. Resistance was basically passive, supported by the self-contained nature of the Udmurt village community. Historians record the existence in the nineteenth century of two antichristian religious movements, data about which are very sparse, since they did not come to the attention of the repressive bodies. The founders and leaders of the sect of the *Vylepyrisi* were heathen priests and sorcerers. The *Vylepyrisi*

threatened everyone among the Udmurts who refused to join them that they would be cruelly punished and that their lives would be filled with misfortune. The *Vylepyrisi* demanded that their followers wear no red-coloured clothing, nor Russian dress in general, nor have any dealings with Russians.

In 1849 the sect of 'lime-tree worshippers' arose. It was opposed both to Christianity and Islam and to the old Udmurt faith with its burdensome sacrifices. The lime-tree worshippers confined themselves to offering libations of *kumyshka* (Udmurt vodka) and beer before the sacred lime-tree. The sect's most important requirement was a prohibition on any dealings with those of other faiths (that is, Russians and Tatars) in order to avoid defilement.

The best-known historical event in connection with Udmurt paganism is the 'Multan affair' (1892–6) (so called after a village of that name), when a group of pagan Udmurts were accused of human sacrifices. Liberal-democratic critics from the very beginning believed these accusations to be a provocation by the government bureaucracy. But even if the 'Multan affair' was really the result of ill-intentioned provocation and not the fruit of incompetence, these accusations could be brought only because the religious life of Udmurts was closed, isolated and secret as far as the surrounding Russian population was concerned.

By 1917 a significant part of the population of present-day Udmurtia consisted of incoming Russian settlers. Among the Udmurts grew up a pleiad of Orthodox enlighteners, the best-known of whom was the priest Grigori Vereshchagin. The Udmurt language was used in parts of the liturgy. The majority of Udmurts were syncretists, however, combining pagan and Orthodox ideas. A few remained 'pure' pagans. Family and village prayer-sites were retained in most rural areas. The institution of high priests and sorcerers – *tuno* – was also retained. In contrast to the Mari, the Udmurt pagans did not display any tendency to centralise or formalise their religious life.

Soon after 1917 began a short period of national revival of the Udmurt people: the Udmurt Autonomous Republic was created and an active and well-educated national intelligentsia took shape. At this time paganism was not seriously repressed by the authorities. But from the mid-1930s the young Udmurt intelligentsia was almost entirely destroyed. The high priests and sorcerers were declared enemies of the people and subjected to cruel repression. Worship was forbidden. Rural holy places (in the form of large barns) and booths and family shrines (smaller barns) were destroyed and sacred groves were uprooted.

By the beginning of Gorbachev's *perestroika* the situation of the Udmurt people was quite deplorable. Udmurts formed only a third of the population of the republic. They had very high levels of alcoholism and suicide and a birth-rate even lower than that of the Russians. Russification in the towns proceeded apace. There were few highly-qualified specialists and entrepreneurs among the Udmurts. From the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s a series of mass social, political and cultural movements grew up among the Udmurts, their aim being the revival of the nation. Religious searching was one element in this national movement. Despite the significant christianisation of the Udmurts, however, the national movement was entirely outside the framework of Orthodoxy, and to a large extent was directly hostile to it. What was the reason for this?

The revival of Orthodoxy began comparatively early in Udmurtia: the diocese, headed by Bishop Palladi (Shiman), was restored in 1989. But things did not go well with him. He was extremely passive, and public opinion from many different quarters considered him to be a person of low moral standards (we are not in a

position either to confirm or deny the justice of this). However, in 1993 the energetic Archbishop Nikolai (Shkrumko) became the head of the diocese. Until *perestroika* he was engaged in 'diplomatic' work in the Department of External Church Relations and immediately after *perestroika* began he headed the re-formed Vladivostok diocese. In less than three years Archbishop Nikolai achieved significant successes: the number of parishes began to rise quickly, many educated people appeared among the clergy, three functioning convents were opened, Sunday schools and summer camps commenced and the newspaper *Pravoslavnaya Udmurtiya* was started. Nikolai was able to establish constructive cooperation with the local authorities, businessmen and a significant section of the Russian intelligentsia.

However, his relations with the Udmurt national movement are complicated, in spite of the fact that formally the Udmurts have their place in the church. Ten out of 75 clergy are Udmurts. In some village parishes parts of divine services are once again performed in the Udmurt language. There is a brilliant scholar in the diocese, Deacon Mikhail Atamanov, an Udmurt by nationality, who has already translated the four gospels and the psalter into modern Udmurt. However, Fr Mikhail himself complained to us that his former Udmurt intelligentsia colleagues have a hostile attitude to his activities and have either reverted to paganism or else sympathise with it. At the same time he does not sense any fervent and interested support in the diocese. This experience is not uncommon. There is a kind of unreflective, unwritten code towards the Udmurts in the church which prevents them from feeling at home there. Yes, there are active Udmurt Orthodox, there are Udmurt priests. But for an Udmurt to become Orthodox means psychologically to reject his national interests. A striking example of this is the Udmurt Vladimir Shklyayev, the chairman of the Orthodox brotherhood 'Samson'. Having become an active Orthodox, he promotes with passion the ideals of Holy Russia and the unity of Russia and is hostile to the Udmurt national movement. The fate of his people has ceased to excite him.

The Russians themselves regard Orthodoxy as their ethnic church. This is never stated, but is implicitly understood: you have become Orthodox – so stand up for Russian interests. But the interests of the expiring Udmurt people, even if they do not contradict Russian interests, do not fully correspond to them. It is not surprising therefore that many if not most of the activists in national movements have a hostile attitude to the Moscow Patriarchate, seeing in it a threat to the Udmurt national way of life. The 'patriotic' Society of Russian Culture in Izhevsk, which speaks out against 'Udmurt nationalism' under Orthodox slogans, although it is small in numbers, is often taken to be the voice of the Moscow Patriarchate. And this mistake is no coincidence: the essential indifference of the Orthodox diocese to Udmurt problems in today's circumstances seems like aggression in Udmurt eyes.

And so paganism has become the basis of the national movement. According to different estimates, from five to 30 per cent of Udmurts are pure pagans (there are different possible criteria) and only 15–40 per cent are Orthodox (the remainder are syncretists). Irrespective of the preservation of ancient Udmurt beliefs among the rural population, the creation of an officially-formulated urban intellectual paganism is a step based on principle, the more so in that previously Udmurt paganism had no forms of mass association. This step was taken in 1990, when a group of Izhevsk intellectuals, artists, writers, scholars and entrepreneurs united in a community of Udmurt pagans, the *Udmurt Vesshch'*. The community was headed by Semen Nikolayevich Vinogradov, well known in Udmurtia as a people's artist of the republic and now a respected high priest. However, Vinogradov cannot become a real, functioning high priest: having come to paganism in his later years as a result of an interest in the

folklore and rural life of his people, his knowledge of the rituals is inadequate, and he does not belong to the priestly clan, which is essential according to Udmurt tradition. Therefore a genuine high priest was sought in the villages, where the pagan traditions have been well preserved. As a result of this search Vasili Maksimov, a simple peasant from a Udmurt village in Tatarstan, became the high priest.

The first task of the community was to awaken a general national feeling of unity among Udmurt pagans. With this aim it was decided to conduct general national worship services (which, by the way, had never happened before), and to do so every year in different regions of the republic, with maximum respect for local features of religious life, in order to promote enthusiasm for paganism throughout Udmurtia. In 1994 40,000 worshippers gathered in the village of Staraya Saklya. At present the community is planning to build a pagan Udmurt cultural and religious centre, in effect a national pagan church.

Traditional Udmurt pagan faith, more rich and complicated in many respects than Mordovian, Chuvash or Mari faith, has been adequately reconstructed<sup>1</sup>, but it is not the subject of this article. It is more interesting and important for us to understand the beliefs of the contemporary Udmurt pagans, or, more precisely, the contemporary intellectual neo-pagans, who organisationally and ideologically form the Udmurt national religious renaissance. Therefore we will briefly paraphrase the credo of the honorary high priest Semen Vinogradov as we understood it during an interview in his studio on 3 April 1995.

The whole of nature in all its manifestations, just like peoples' lives, has a soul, behind which stand divinities and spirits. Spiritual life has three basic levels: the cosmic, in which the central divinity, the Sun, Inmar, takes first place; that of the aerial elements, the heavens, Kvaz'; and the Earth, creation, creatures, Kelchin'. Alongside the hierarchy of Inmar, Kvaz' and Kelchin' there is Lud (Keremet'), king of all evil spirits. But Lud is by no means a devil, but a just sovereign of evil, sending down misfortunes upon people for their transgressions. Paradise and hell do not exist. The dead live in their own way in their own kingdom, their own element. The spirits of ancestors are not revered or worshipped, they are communed with and cajoled, so that they will not drag you into the next world. The dead live in a world which is the mirror of ours. There also they enter into marriage and till the land. Therefore two or three years after the death of a relative he or she must be sent a dowry – a horse must be killed for a man, a cow for a woman. Worship must take place within the family, at a shrine in the home, about 80 times a year, and communally at common shrines and sacred groves several times a year. Sorcerers (*tuno*) played an important role in the life of the Udmurt people – vagrant magicians, fortune-tellers, prophets, soothsayers, shamans and healers. Nowadays they have almost entirely disappeared, but they are essential for full-blooded religious life.

In Vinogradov's opinion the aggressive world religions, Christianity and Islam, have led humankind into a blind alley. The Russian and other peoples who have renounced their gods in favour of Christianity have no future, because their spiritual betrayal has led to deep injury of the people's soul. The Japanese people, who have preserved their popular faith, have better prospects. The progress of humanity compels people to renounce Christianity and revert to paganism. Only peoples who find in themselves the strength to take this step have any prospect for the future. It is a notable fact that it was in Izhevsk in 1994 that the Russian pagan community *Tur* first appeared. It is difficult to say whether or not the propaganda of Udmurt paganism played any role in its origin, but the leaders of the *Udmurt Vesshch'* welcomed its appearance.

However badly Udmurt pagans relate to Christianity, they relate still worse to Islam. This enmity is to a significant degree foreordained by the historical memory of the people. Northern Tataria and Bashkiria were in ancient times not only the area of resettlement of the Udmurt people, but also the most developed region of ancient Udmurtia. The town of Arsk, the ancient Udmurt capital, where Udmurt princes had their residence, is today in the territory of Tataria. Enforced islamicisation, discrimination and expropriation are not forgotten today. But it is not only history that is at the root of enmity towards Islam. In the northern areas of Bashkiria, where Tatars predominate, more than 20,000 Udmurts still live. These Udmurts have preserved a strong national consciousness and pagan faith. In the village of Kaishabali, Yanalyk district, pan-Bashkir Udmurt pagan worship services have taken place annually in recent times. Leaders of the Udmurt national movement have told us more than once about discrimination and even repression against their fellow-tribesmen by the Bashkir (in the national sense, the Tatar) authorities. For some reason activists of the Udmurt national movement hold the view that sooner or later the 'all-seeing' United Nations organisation will speak out on behalf of the Bashkir Udmurts. We cannot judge how realistic the notions of persecution in northern Bashkortostan may be, but they are a fact of public consciousness, provoking steadfast enmity towards Islam among Udmurts in general and pagans in particular.

The uniform organisational political link between paganism and certain political movements, characteristic of Chuvashia, has not yet taken shape in Udmurtia. This may be the result of personal characteristics of the leaders of the pagan community. The honorary priest Vinogradov is apolitical and has a poor understanding of politics, living in the world of ancient myths and folklore. However, the *ideological* connection between paganism and the national political movement *Kenesh* (the Pan-Udmurt Association) is obvious. The movement's anti-Russian and anti-Orthodox orientation, its demands for 'udmurtisation' of the republic and for the establishment of a quota in parliament and the administration, converge with the pagan world-view's resistance to Orthodoxy. Though the majority of them are not practising pagans, the activists of *Kenesh* do at least sympathise with paganism. The logic of the development of political and religious nationalisms will inevitably lead to their merging.

The leaders of *Kenesh* were convinced that the Udmurt people would give wide support to their programme, but the elections to the Udmurt parliament in March 1995 led to a crushing defeat: not a single one of their candidates entered parliament, even in districts where Udmurts were in the majority. There is, however, a more moderate Udmurt national movement, *Shunda*. In the 1995 elections it formed a bloc with *Kenesh*, although it has never shared its radical views. The defeat in the elections showed that this marriage of convenience was based on a mistaken calculation, and this led to the complete demarcation of the two movements. In a conversation with us one of the leaders of *Shunda*, Vladimir Vladykin, who has a doctorate in history, put his ideas about the situation of the Udmurts as follows:

We are bound for ever to the Russians. If there is a catastrophe for the Russians, then we shall be dragged into it too. We shall either survive with the Russians or else be done for with them. To stand apart from them, to demand privileges, is a harmful occupation with no future.

Another activist of *Shunda*, Angelina Krylova, a doctor of philosophy, believes that the president and other leaders of the republic could even be Russians as long as they respect the Udmurt people and its culture. Sometimes a Russian can do more than an

Udmurt. The Russians do not respect the Udmurts and treat them as second-rate beings, but there is no discrimination. An able Udmurt can make a career just as a Russian can. Udmurts must overcome the feeling of being second-rate, of humiliation, and become capable of competing. At present there are few Udmurt engineers, natural scientists, doctors, entrepreneurs, bankers. Educational and training programmes are needed. *Shunda* is involved in this.

What is the religious orientation of *Shunda*? Activists in the movement acknowledge the spiritual values of both paganism and Orthodoxy, but at the same time speak of the deficiencies and dangers which stem from them. They support national festivals of pagan worship, but are rather afraid that 'paganism is a step backwards for the Udmurt people'. They acknowledge the significance of Christianity and seem dimly to believe in something, but not for anything will they join the church. Angelina Krylova is a striking example of this: she has recently been baptised but rarely attends services and speaks of Orthodoxy as the Russian church. This is how she herself describes her religious views:

Two years ago I forced myself to be baptised. This was a conscious step, since I admire Christianity. At the same time I feel my woods, my fields, I feel their mystic power, their influence on my spiritual state. I will never turn completely to Christianity, but neither will I revert to paganism. I cannot describe my state of mind.

The worldview of *Shunda* is in essence a naturally formed intellectual copy of the peasant syncretism of the majority of the Udmurt people. There is a similar syncretistic layer in all the Finno-Ugrian republics, and it is particularly predisposed to the creation of a kind of national church in which elements of folklore and Orthodox consciousness are combined. In Mordovia there are the Aleshkin brothers, religiously gifted leaders who have founded the 'Moksha-Erzya Dr Martin Luther Church'. Such leaders have not appeared in Udmurtia.

The Udmurt authorities are coming up against complicated religio-social problems which could lead to serious conflicts if wrongly approached. Apart from an active and influential Orthodox diocese and a resurgent paganism, there are in the republic up to seven per cent of Muslim Tatars; numerically few but active Old Believers, both Belokrinitisa and Pomorsky; Baptists (among whom, incidentally, the Udmurt element has been growing rapidly in recent times); and German Lutherans. It has to be said that the government of the republic is responding successfully to the challenges of the times.

According to the republican constitution, power is concentrated in the hands of the head of the republican government, Aleksandr Volkov. He heads the political bloc *Udmurtiya*, which received the majority of votes at the April elections. From the very start of his political career Volkov adopted an active position with regard to religious associations. Back in 1988, at the beginning of *perestroika*, as mayor of Glazov he built an Orthodox church in the town, probably one of the first in Russia. Having become leader of Udmurtia he restored the ancient Aleksandr Nevsky Cathedral from a ruin, he is planning to help with the restoration of monasteries and is discussing the possibility of reconstructing the Mikhailov Cathedral near the Izhevsk factory. These actions could pit religious minorities against him. However, he has found a pragmatic, relatively pluralistic line in his relationship with the largest 'traditional' religions. He has never demonstrated his ties to the bishop, and the authorities have always produced satisfactory responses to protests (not always well-founded ones) stimulated among some religious minorities (such as the Muslims and the pagans) by

'Orthodox propaganda' in educational institutions. The government has given significant economic help in the construction and restoration of mosques and the Old Believer church and the Lutherans have also found support. Volkov has approached the problems of the pagans in an analogous way: funds have been set aside for republican worship and now the financing of a temple in Izhevsk is being planned. As a result not only the leaders of *Shunda* but also the leadership of the pagan community headed by Vinogradov are saying that they will now seek union with Volkov and will more than likely vote for him at the next elections.

At the same time Volkov's 'democratism' is clearly of a relative nature. It was on his initiative that a new local law on religion was passed in 1996 directed against foreign missionaries and 'non-traditional religions'. In 1997 the Udmurt procuracy ruled that this law was incompatible with the Constitution of the republic. In the political sphere Volkov now seems to be pursuing a course aimed at destroying the institutions of local self-government.

### **Notes and References**

<sup>1</sup> See the fundamental work by V. Ye. Vladykin, *Religiozno-mifologicheskaya kartina mira drevnykh udmurtov* (Izhevsk, 1994).

(Translated from the Russian by Jane Ellis)