

MODERN PAGAN AND NATIVE FAITH MOVEMENTS IN
CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

STUDIES IN CONTEMPORARY AND HISTORICAL PAGANISM

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MODERN PAGAN AND NATIVE FAITH MOVEMENTS
IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

Edited by
KAARINA AITAMURTO AND SCOTT SIMPSON

ACUMEN

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16. NEOPAGANISM IN THE MARI EL REPUBLIC

Boris Knorre

THE LAST PAGAN NATION?

The Mari are a Volga Finnic people found in a small geographic area of the Russian Federation.¹ Mari intellectuals often call their people the “last Pagan nation of Europe” and present this as a source of national pride. This claim, that the Mari are a pillar of Paganism, has some grounds. Well into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Mari preserved many of their old folk rituals, habits, myths and legends, everyday practices, and customs. At least in comparison with their neighboring ethnic groups in the European North of Russia in the Volga and Ural regions—such as the Komis, Mordvas, Chuvash, Udmurts, Besermjans, Volga Tatars, and Bashkirs—it is clear that the Mari have more archaic spiritual traditions.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the Russian ethnographer Dmitrii Zelenin marveled at how Mari women worked in the fields in the July heat with tightly wrapped feet and without removing their national costume, which includes a big, heavy head-dress. In the Mari people, Zelenin found the manifestation of an exceptionally strong sense of national identity and commitment to one’s own tradition. “Fearing and detesting all that is Russian, they say, ‘to kill our faith means to kill us,’ and about their pagan prayers in the forest [they say]: ‘if we cease to go to the forest, we will die, our whole tribe will become extinct.’”²

Nevertheless, the process of developing ethnic unity within the Mari tribes took place relatively late. The earliest “common Mari prayer” (the term “prayer” in this case refers to a celebratory sacrifice) that literary documents mention took place in Vyatsk District, next to a spring in the village of Kyupryan Sola on 3 December 1828.³ In this well-attended public display of indigenous Mari prayer, a very large number of animals (99 of each type) were sacrificed and the event was acknowledged significant by the Mari as part of their nascent self-awareness as a people.⁴ However, the recorded beliefs and cults of the Mari in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

showed a great deal of local variation. Even though a common pantheon was already in the process of forming, their theological conceptions remained dispersed and varied in different tribal groups.

Mari popular spiritual culture was influenced by Islam, which spread to the Volga region in the tenth century,⁵ and from the fifteenth century onwards, by Orthodox Christianity. At the end of the sixteenth century the Mari were conquered by the Russian Empire and, in theory, converted to Russian Orthodoxy, although in practice the Mari continued many of their old practices relatively unhindered. Nonetheless, pressure to conform to Orthodoxy and assimilate into Russian culture was strong. In the 1870s, the growing strength of Russian Orthodox Christianity instigated a reformist-revival movement that sought to establish a set of characteristics to distinguish the traditional Mari faith from that of the Russians. This movement, *Kugu-sorta* ("Great Candle"),⁶ continued to spread into the early years of the twentieth century, and in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution they even declared independence and called for the eviction of Slavs from their territories. The Bolsheviks quickly quashed the new state and imprisoned many Mari intellectuals. In addition to religious repression, colonization of the region by Russian-speakers also increased. Although a Mari cultural revival had cautiously begun in the 1960s and 1970s, it could not openly re-emerge until the 1990s.

Even during the Soviet times, within the isolated rural population of the Mari, certain elements remained well preserved: local and family prayers, reverence for the sacred grove, and similar "private" practices of the tradition. In the 1990s, some urban intellectuals among the Mari initiated an active process of restoration of the native faith. The conduct of these Pagan rituals extended the boundaries of family tradition into public space, and at this time public communal sacrifices and prayers reemerged. In the Republic of Mari El, there are 600 holy groves (*kusoto*), of which the majority have been taken under the protection of the state.⁷

STATISTICS ON THE MARI FAITH

At the moment, Mari Paganism is composed of three basic groups. The first of these is *Chimari*, non-baptized Mari Pagans who try to distance themselves from all Christian rituals (the term *Chimari* comes from the Russian word pure, *chistie* plus Mari). The second one, *Marla vera*, contains baptized Mari, who are called adherents of a "dual faith" because they follow Pagan traditions that are combined with attendance at Orthodox Church services and various elements of Christian rituals. In addition, there is a revivalist movement, *Kugu Sorta*, which also includes non-baptized, "pure" Mari.

In the Mari El Republic, Mari Paganism is officially called "Mari Traditional Religion" (MTR). A central religious organization is registered in this

name in the capital of the state, Yoshkar-Ola. This organization gives legal status to Mari Pagans in Russia. Today, the MTR unites five local religious organizations and more than a hundred religious groups. The members of the MTR represent not only *Chimari*, but also people of dual faith and adherents of the *Kugu Sorta*.⁸

Table 15.1 Religiosity of the population of the Mari-el Republic in 2006.

Religious category	%
Orthodox Christianity	67.3
Orthodox Christianity and the MTR (i.e. dual faith)	11.5
MTR (non-baptized, “pure Mari”)	2.5
Islam	4.8
Other religions	0.3
Does not believe in God or has difficulties in answering	5.1
Believes in God, but does not subscribe to any religion	5.1
Believes in a higher power that presides over the world	3.5

Table 15.1 summarizes data from a sociological survey of the population of the Mari el Republic conducted in 2006.⁹ Nevertheless, these data do not give a conclusive account of the actual number of Mari Pagans. Due to the influence that the Russian Orthodox Church has gained in Russian social and political life in recent years, some people choose to identify themselves as Orthodox even though they still preserve many Mari Pagan habits and outlook. According to surveys conducted by Mari sociologists in the middle of the 1990s, of the population of Mari El, 5–7 percent are “pure Pagans,” and 60 percent dual believers. Furthermore, an even higher percentage of Pagans can be found among the Mari who have emigrated because of Christianity and who now live in Bashkiria, Tatarstan, and in the Urals.¹⁰ Immigrant Mari believers can also be found in the Perm area and in Udmurtiya, Nizhegorodsky parish.

THE MARI PANTHEON

Mari Paganism is not purely polytheistic but rather henotheistic. That is, the multiple gods are seen as manifestations of the power of one supreme God. The renowned scholar Vasil’ev (1883–1961), who was a Mari himself and after whom the Mari Institute for the Study of Languages, Literature and History was named, dedicated a whole chapter on this topic in his 1927 book about Mari beliefs and rituals. The chapter is entitled: “The Unsubstantiated Idea of the Religion of Maris as a Crude Polytheism.” He wrote, “one can hardly find a Mari who would say that there exists not one, but many gods; and this concerns not only baptized Mari but also Pagan

Mari.”¹¹ Nevertheless, even though Mari people understand the many names of the so-called gods as just appellations of the various manifestations of one God, there are some exceptions, especially the divinities who are oppositional forces to the main God.

The main god of the contemporary Mari people is Kugu Yumo (“Great Yumo”). In official Mari Pagan literature and in the prayers of the Mari priests, Kugu Yumo is called Osh Poro Kugu Yumo (“the Great White Good God”). This God has a masculine form and embraces the idea of the cosmos, the highest reason, and the protector of people. He made the heavenly laws that are revered by the Earth and the Universe. Kugu Yumo has etymological parallels referring to god in other related languages such as Finnish (Jumala), Estonian (Jumal), Zyryan (Yen), and Udmurt (Inmar).

In the contemporary Mari religion, the second figure in importance is the god Keremet, who is an ambiguous and contradictory figure. On the one hand, Keremet is the opponent of Kugu Yumo, and has a negative aspect; he is dangerous and pernicious. On the other hand, the Mari acknowledge his power, and consider it necessary to maintain personal contact with him through making sacrifices and consecrating trees or even groves. Many of the eastern Mari even see Keremet as a national defender of Maris which, however, does not negate his negative, dangerous aspects. The word *keremet* is also used as a generic term for nasty spirits, such as the spirits of people who have not been properly buried, or dead people who had vicious disposition.

The evilness of Keremet is not absolute. While Kugu Yumo is rather distant from humanity in the sky, Keremet is the lord of the earth and especially of the waters. He also records the misdeeds of human beings. As a rule, Keremet does not punish without a reason, but in response to the bad deeds that people do or because of some violation of rituals. The demonization of Keremet’s figure was mainly due to Christian influence and therefore the way Keremet is perceived differs between dual believers and *Chimari*.

In the religious worldview of contemporary Mari Pagans, one can find surviving echoes of the ancient myths and new interpretations of archetypal figures. The figures of Yumo and Keremet are part of an ancient myth of the earth diver (a water bird that created the world by diving down to bring up the earth from the abysses of water).¹² There are also contemporary living interpretations of the myth of Yumyn-Udyr (“Yumo’s daughter”). According to the myth, Yumyn-Udyr regularly had to descend the silky stairs from heaven to earth in order to pasture the “heavenly herd of cattle.” In consequence, she once married a mortal. For the mortal, the marriage ended tragically: out of jealousy, Keremet mauled him and in the place of his death grew birches and oaks. Nevertheless, some Mari families trace their lineage to this marriage and consider the husband of Yumyn-Udyr to be their totemic ancestor.

The interconnectedness of the divine and the mundane worlds is also acknowledged in other myths about gods, who descend on the earth to pasture their herd due to the lack of hay in the heavens. A Mari *kart* (shaman), Moisei Yambulatov, for example, recounts the myth of the initial unity of gods and humans in the following way:

Once upon a time humans and gods lived in a star (actually, in a planet, but we call it a star). They attended domestic animals: cows, sheep, and horses. Once, due to a natural cataclysm, the grass stopped growing there and the gods sent the people to earth so that these would feed the herd, after which the cows were lifted back to the heavens and everyone ate. But one day, when the people descended to the earth, a planetary catastrophe happened and the people and the animals could not return back to the star and remained on the earth. In order to feed the gods, people begun to prepare the meat of animals in a fire. The souls of the animals that were burnt in the fire rise to the star to the gods, who consume this spirit and, in that way, are fed.¹³

People living in the rural areas often tell stories about mysterious, holy figures. These numerous helping gods personify various objects and phenomena in nature and important attributes of domestic animals. One of the most revered is Shochyn-Ava—the manifestation of the birthing forces of nature. The most popular divinities comprise those who protect agricultural work, such as the mother-goddesses of sun, water, earth, wind, thunder, lightning, fire, and forest (Keche-Ava, Vud-Ada, Mlande-Ava, Mardezh-Ava, Kudurcho-Ava, Volgenche-Ava, Tul-Ava, and Kozhl-Ava, respectively). The word *ava* means “mother” and denotes feminine divinity. According to the contemporary folkloric tradition, Keche-Ava protects from illnesses, Vud-Ava gives luck in fishing, Mlande-Ava has her share of responsibility for the harvest, Mardezh-Ava is the goddess of wind that purifies and cultivates everything, and Tul-Ava protects from fires.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the same divinities can be acknowledged in a male form: in these cases, the name has a suffix *-on* that means a “tsar” or a “father.” Such usage is, however, rather uncommon. Some of the most important activities or festivals can also become an object of deification and personification. The Mari world of spirits consists not only of gods, but also of individual angel-servants. These include *Sukso*, the defender of faith, who protects people from the forces of nature and poverty; *Vitn’yze*, the spirit helper who helps gods; and *Piyambar*, a goddess prophet and protector whom the Mari link with predestination and divination.¹⁵

Virtually all contemporary Mari people who live in rural villages believe in the existence of *vechory* (or *vesiory*), a class of local family spirits on

whom the material success of humans depends and whom must therefore be fed. Some Mari people believe that a *vesiora* can be either female or male. According to one of our informants, “it is necessary to feed the female *vesiora*, because she will bring everything to the house, while from male *vesiory* one can expect only destruction.”¹⁶ There is also a demonic spirit, *obda*, whom the Mari blame for social defects. If conflicts occur in a family or someone in the family is a drunkard, the blame is put on an *obda*.

A contemporary phenomenon in Mari Paganism is the cult of Mari “saintly heroes”—national leaders and defenders of the Mari tribes. Especially revered are Chumbylat, Akpatyr, Poltysh, and Chotkar Patyr.¹⁷ According to legend, Chumbylat is a saint to all the Mari, a prince-warrior. At the end of the eleventh century, he gathered under his protection the majority of the scattered Mari tribes and told them to build cities.¹⁸ In the 1830s, it was proposed that Chumbylat’s grave is located in the depths of a cliff in a rocky mountain by the river Nemda. Even though this cliff has been destroyed, local Mari have again revived the cult of Chumbylat and every year on 26 June they come to this place to honor their hero and to ask protection and strength from him. In the Mari worldview, the figure of Chumbylat is often mixed with the figure of the tribal god of Kuryk Kugyzs, known as Kuryk Kugu (“the great mountain person”).¹⁹

Since the end of the 1990s, another hero, Akpatyr, whom the Mari consider to be one of the ancient tribal princes, has gained considerable popularity. In the time of his service of the Russian tsar in the sixteenth century, due to his diplomatic skills, he managed to secure a peaceful existence for Mari villages amidst Russian and Tatar expansions. The revival of the cult of Akpatyr, and the popularization of his holiday, were largely the initiative and achievement of a local businessman, Valerii Solovev (a director of the AkBaktyr meat-packing company). Solovev had a stone monument erected in the village of Bol’shoi Kiyak at his own expense, and funded folk festivals held nearby. Various legends have been attached to Akpatyr, including tales of supplicants recovering from diseases or getting aid in business thanks to his help.²⁰

Pilgrims bring various gifts, such as clothes, money, food, or candles, to the places where the heroes are honored. The reverence for heroes is closely related to Mari totemic consciousness. The high *kart* (*onaeng*) of Mari Paganism, Aleksandr Tanygin, maintains that the well-being of Mari villages depends on whether the inhabitants are worthy of the memory of their tribal ancestors. According to Tanygin, the Mari tradition acknowledges nine especially honored and powerful ancient hero-ancestors. In order to address such an ancestor, one needs special spiritual power. *Onaeng* argues that “if nowadays in some village there could be found a morally pure person, who in his spiritual power could invoke one of our heroes, our great progenitors, then doubtlessly that village would revitalize and reach the greatest blossoming.”²¹

THE INFLUENCE OF ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY ON THE MARI SPIRITUAL TRADITION

Given that the ancient Mari faith was not particularly structured or rigidly formulated, the outside influence of monotheistic religions has been important. The Islamic influence in the early period has not yet been studied sufficiently, but the more recent impact of Orthodox Christianity can be discussed more thoroughly.

Professor Smirnov, who studied the Mari in the second half of the nineteenth century, presents an example, which in his opinion consolidated a religious system called “dual faith”: “The Cheremis²² *karts* of Urzhumskii parish who conduct a pagan ritual cross themselves.”²³ Today, a characteristic manifestation of the Christian impact on Mari religion is that some of the attributes of the Christian God the Father are sometimes applied to Kugu Yumo. Christ can also be acknowledged as Kugu Yumo’s son, “Khristos Yumo.” The Mari faith also contains an original re-interpretation of the Christian story of the sufferings of Jesus Christ. His death and resurrection are acknowledged, but they did not occur on the Orthodox Christian days of Friday and Sunday, but on Wednesday and Friday.²⁴

In the worldview of the rural population of the Mari areas, there is a firm belief in a judgment after death followed by rewards in the afterlife. One of the most revered spirits is Kiyamatt-Töra, the ruler and judge of the Otherworld. The Mari teachings about the afterlife, of heaven and hell, can also be seen to contain elements of Christian dualism.

Among the Christian figures who are especially honored by the Mari are the apostles Peter and Paul, Saint Nicholas, and Elijah the Prophet. Consequently, the spring and summer calendar festivals that are dedicated to these figures are widely celebrated in the Mari countryside. All of these are conceived as Yumos in the Mari religious system, and that word can be attached to the name of a saint, as, for example, “Nikolai-Yumo” (i.e. Nicholas plus Yumo). Saint Nicholas has almost ceased to be an alien god. Even those Mari who consciously reject elements of Christian tradition, still leave Nicholas in their pantheon, explaining it in the following way: “Other saints are great phonies ... but this old-timer is a bit true.”²⁵

The Orthodox Christian tradition of Saint Nicholas as a healer has found an analogy in a “typical figure of a mythical water ‘master’ whom Finno-Ugrians exorcised as the cause of illness, but who also could heal if people knew how to please him,” as Vyatkin historian and ethnographer Korshunkov notes. “Nicholas (more precisely, Nichola-Yumo) ... transformed into a pagan god among the Mari ... occasionally quite dangerous and malign.” This deity was associated with water springs and received “characteristics of dangerous water ‘masters’ of the Other world in their pagan religion.”²⁶ It can even be suggested that in the Mari consciousness Saint Nicholas may have some relation with Keremet-Kugurak, the feared god who is associated with the “underworld.”

Already in the nineteenth century, Smirnov noticed that “Nicholas the Miracle Worker, Varsonofii²⁷ and the Mother of God of Kazan²⁸ have been assimilated into the Cheremish gods to the extent that like the latter ones, they have received the status of the servant of *sakche-shukshy* [*sukso*].”²⁹ Many Mari perceived the Mother of God of Kazan as a merely an icon, not in the context beyond a sacred representation. Consequently, they did not worship the Christian figure of the Virgin Mary, but the iconic figure.

The Mari theology is by no means stagnant. Leaders of the national religious reawakening have formulated numerous concepts of a Mari trinity, defining various gods into an entity resembling the Christian trinity. Sometimes they also offer theological arguments for forming interreligious relations.

RITUAL SYNCRETISM

The influence of Orthodox Christianity is also evident in the sacrificial rituals during which the participants use Orthodox icons. These are placed on trees and dedicated to the god to whom the prayer is addressed. The icons are ceremonially carried to and from the holy grove and greeted again in Mari homes.³⁰

The icons are often conceived as independent deities of secondary importance, who are subordinate to Kugu Yumo. When the icons are removed from the *kysoto* (the holy grove) after the celebrations have been completed, people bow to the holy grove with the icons. In other words, they make the icons bow to Kugu Yumo too. In the Mari perception, such subordination is only natural, because icons are family deities who therefore rank in the hierarchy below the common Mari social gods.

A widespread practice is that Mari believers participate in both Mari Pagan and Christian rituals. They sacrifice animals in their prayers, but also take part in Christian sacraments. Particularly important sacraments include the baptism of children and partaking in Holy Communion. Sometimes an animal might even be sacrificed to an Orthodox Christian saint. Interestingly, the sacrifice itself can be explained by referring to the Bible. “We revive the sacrificial practice of the Old Testament that was done by the people of Israel.” Such an explanation was provided to me by a *kart* in the republic of Tatarstan Moisei Yambulatoev and an inhabitant of Kirovsky area in Mari El, Emiliya Petrova, who worships Khristos-Yumo, but regularly goes to church and occasionally partakes in Holy Communion. The priest of the neighboring Orthodox church threatens to excommunicate Emiliya, who is so active in the Pagan faith, but so far he has not taken such a decisive step.

Similar practices have been witnessed in earlier in Mari history as well. According to Smirnov:

Cheremis make the same demands to the Christian saints as they make to keremets: not only are these obliged to save him [the Cheremis] from disease and attacks, but also to protect him from his enemies. After a keremet or another has become deaf to the prayers of a Cheremis, and has left his enemies untouched, a Cheremis goes to church and prays for a Christian saint to punish his enemy: to please the saint, he lights a candle for him, but standing.³¹

Usually, the Christian ritual elements do not bring anything fundamentally new to the Pagan worldview of the people, who follow local traditions. Orthodox Christianity stratifies with the Pagan consciousness of the Mari. It does not transform their cultic system, but only contributes new material for Mari re-interpretation. Some originally Orthodox cults have even helped the Mari to strengthen their own religious conceptualizations.

RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS AND MARI CALENDAR

The main themes in the Mari festivals refer to fertility. The aim is to invoke abundant harvest and luck with domestic livestock. Rituals contain agrarian symbolism and imitate the episodes of the agricultural cycle. Toidybekova suggests that these rituals can be divided into spring-summertime festivals, dedicated to the beginning of the agricultural work and autumn-winter rituals of thanksgiving.³² Nevertheless, the majority of the modern Mari ritual practices cannot be reduced to events exclusively connected with the beginnings and ends of agricultural work.

The structure of the “traditional” indigenous Mari calendar reveals the pervasive influence of the Russian Orthodox liturgical calendar; the majority of the Mari festivals dates are the same as the holidays of the folk Russian Orthodox yearly cycle, only with Mari names.³³ The Mari festival calendar begins from the festival of Shorykiol (“sheep-leg holiday”), which has many elements that are closely analogous to the popular Russian celebration of the Christian twelve days of Christmas (Svyatki), and which contains specific games, fortune telling, pranks, and masquerades.³⁴ Shorykiol is also connected to the New Year and the beginning of the lengthening of the day. The “magic of the first day” introduces people to the rhythm of the incipient year; it is believed that what happens during the first days of the newly born sun will reflect what will happen during the whole solar year. The games of Shorykiol also represent the unpredictability of nature. Of course, many traditions have now disappeared, but they are actively sought to be reanimated as cultural phenomena, even in state-sponsored regional programs.

A revealing example of Mari syncretism is the festival Kuguचे (“Big Day”), an apparent calque from a Russian folk-name for Easter, Velikii Den’

("Great Day"). In the thinking of many of the Mari, Kuguche is connected with Easter and is celebrated on the same day as Easter. On Kuguche, Mountain Mari often go to church and follow Christian rituals. However, a part of Meadow Mari follow separate Pagan rituals.³⁵ Eastern Mari in Bashkiria, who wish to distance themselves from Christian tradition, do not celebrate Kuguche at the same time as Christian Easter, but few days or a week earlier. Among the adherents of "pure faith," the Big Day is understood as the first day of the Mari peoples' life on earth, after Yumyn-Udyr descended to earth with her son.

Mari religious leaders, who attempt to purify the Mari calendar of Christian influences, may also seek to find a Pagan meaning in the holidays that seem to derive from Christianity. The head of MTR, Tanygin, claims that it is not Kuguchu that should be compared to Easter, but Easter to Kuguchu. In his opinion, the festival is connected with the creation of the world by a water bird, and not with the resurrection of Christ. According to him, the core idea of the festival is to remember the moment when the "water bird laid an egg for the Milky Way. Of that egg emanated our life, only the Orthodox have forgotten this." But, the *kart* notes, "of course, the egg does appear in the Orthodox tradition ... at Easter, Orthodox color eggs, but it is only a fraction of the ancient understanding of the meaning of the egg that has remained in the Orthodox tradition."³⁶

Another example of the mixture of Pagan and Orthodox elements is the festival Surem³⁷ that is usually placed on the Petrov Den ("Day of Peter"), a Russian folkloric name for the liturgical feast of the apostles Peter and Paul, celebrated by Orthodox Russians on 12 July. The Pagan meaning of the festival relates to the blossoming of vegetation in nature. On that day, people express their thanksgiving in prayers and ask for abundance on earth. Nowadays, sheep, geese, and ducks are usually sacrificed in this ceremony. In their prayers, the Mari often address Petr-Yumo ("Peter plus Yumo") as one of the Mari gods. Again, the understanding of the festival is not monolithic. For example, during the communal prayers at Surem in the grove Toshto-Yal in 2009, some of the participants reported that they were celebrating Petr-Yumo while others claimed to celebrate Surem. One of the Mari festival organizers, Nikolai Zaitsev, observed:

the true meaning of the festival does not refer to Peter or Paul because neither one of these are yumos at all. Actually, it is *Surem* that is celebrated. Nevertheless, we do not demand of people that they give up traditions that are familiar to them and therefore, we do not obstruct those who pray to Petr-Yumo. A time will come when they will themselves reject Christian layers.³⁸

Some Mari festivals are not connected with the Christian liturgical cycle, such as Agavairem, the "celebration of the field." It is celebrated at the end

of April and in May; the exact dates vary and depend on the climatic conditions. During the Agavairem religious rituals, *karts* invoke the god-protectors of agricultural work. The Mari even recognize a special “god of the festival,” Agavairem-Yumo as a “divinity of creative energy.” This interpretation has, however, a neologistic character. In order to distance themselves from Orthodox Christianity and to present their faith as archaic as possible, some MTR leaders have decided to introduce the Zoroastrian calendar as a Mari calendar.

HIERARCHICAL “UPGRADE” OF MARI PAGANISM

Nowadays, many proponents of the national reawakening in the Mari intelligentsia do not like the Russian word *yazychestvo* (paganism), because it bears negative connotations not only among the Orthodox clergy, but for the secular authorities as well. Moreover, many Mari, due to the long Orthodox influence, conceive of the term in negative terms.³⁹ Instead they prefer to refer to keywords like “tradition,” “ancient times,” “nationality,” etc. and describe their religion as “Mari Traditional Religion” or simply “the Mari faith.” The administrators of the Mari El Republic do not always meet the requests of religious leaders, but they avoid the word “pagan” in relation to popular Mari faith in their official documents.

In an age of easy access to information and global technologies, the Mari must find meaningful responses to new influence and to construct compelling forms for their own inner stabilization. One such form is a gradual formation of hierarchic structures for the administration of local MTR groups. It seems that the democratic and non-structured nature that had earlier characterized the Mari religious tradition is now in danger. For example, nowadays an outsider cannot get an audience with Mari *karts* without the agreement of *onanega* (the high *kart*). The strengthening of hierarchic principles in the communities of the Mari faith is encouraged by the Russian Orthodox influence. By defining centralized structures, Mari communities are better able to interface with their social surroundings of a centralized state and other centralized religious institutions. So far, this strengthening of administrative hierarchy has not yet decisively dictated the forms and the content of religious ceremonies. When the high *kart* Tanygin attends local Mari festivals, he does not prescribe strict rules, but he is valued as an acknowledged authority who may be asked to give recommendations on how the celebration should be conducted.

Not all Mari religious leaders are ready to subordinate to the authority of the high *kart*. For example, the MTR organization has conflicting relations with a group of Pagans headed by people from Yoshkar-Ola, including Laid Shemeier (Russian name, Nikolai Kozlov), who led the general Mari council for a couple of years, and the *kart* Vitaly Tanakov, an ideologist of the

Mari faith who represents a more radical nationalistic form of the religion. Tanakov received a verdict of incitement to hatred on national and religious grounds for his book *Zhrets govorit* ("The Priest Speaks"). After the verdict Tanygin hastened to distance himself from Tanakov.

In consequence, Tanakov has broken away from the MTR and the Mari pagans in Yoshkar-Ola are divided into MTR, headed by Tanygin, and the "party of Tanakov." Even at the times of the common community Mari prayers which are celebrated in the vicinity of Yoshkar-Ola, these groups pray in different groves and deny each other's right to use the word *onaeng*.⁴⁰

The national religious revival of the Mari people also manifests in the social and political spheres. In 1996, in the political vocabulary of Mari El was introduced a new honorary title, "*On'yzha*."⁴¹ This is an elected position of the chairperson of the Mari Council (Marii Mer KaNash) that was founded in 1992. The *On'yzha* runs the meetings of the delegates of Mari people and is in charge of the execution of their decisions.

CODIFICATION OF THE "HOLY SCRIPTURE"

In the Mari Pagan community, a recent innovation is an attempt to establish a codex a commonly acknowledged holy scriptures. The ideologists of MTR have created codifications of "Mari prayers," systematic presentations and even a kind of theological reference books for the Mari faith, such as *Yumyn iula* ("The basics of the traditional Mari faith") by Popov and Tanygin, and *Mari Synun'*, edited by Novikov.

Thus these activists have begun to translate folkloric tradition, which has been preserved to our days in oral form, into a written form. Such a work is one of the most significant stages in the life of many religious traditions, especially because it changes their ability to extend their influence. The earlier Mari prayers which were recorded by scholars in the nineteenth or early twentieth century were mainly improvised, conversational requests to the gods to fulfill some specific need. Contemporary Mari prayers reflect the same ordinary, mundane life. Prayers deal with situations that are met on an everyday basis by the average local resident.⁴² They can have an economic (or agricultural) dimension, but a prominent place is held by such issues as family welfare in the context of tribal relations.

A typical Mari relationship to their holy texts can be exemplified by an interview with an elderly woman, Mariya Kuznetsova from the village of Aryk Mallmyzhskii. While telling us about the various Mari gods and spirits she announced that "about all this it is written in the gospel." She admitted that she did not possess the gospel because "how could one obtain it nowadays?" In the Mari folkloric legends, there actually is a tale, according to which initially the Mari did have a holy book, but, unhappily, a cow once ate it, and since then the Mari have been without their holy scripture.⁴³

Apparently, already in the past the Mari had some feeling of religious inadequacy due to their “lack” of holy scripture similar to the Bible or the Koran.

UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF GLOBALIZATION

Despite the disputes over “orthodoxy” within Mari believers, the cultic forms that have been created in the process of unification are syncretic. They incorporate not only elements from Mari religious experience, but also Christian influence and influences found on the Internet or through international contacts with other cultures that were unknown to the early Mari people who inhabited the forests of the Volga region. Many contemporary Mari religious leaders readily adopt religious themes from various foreign mystical and theosophical literatures. The authors attempt to reconcile these loaned elements with the ideals of “primordial-ness” and “local-ness” which are central in the Mari tradition.

Mari *karts* often resort to occult-theosophical paradigms in order to elevate the position of the Mari people and to give special sacred status to Povolzhya region, the area where they live. For example, *kart* Tanakov argues that “in the age of Aquarius, cosmic rays have been transmitted to eastern Europe, western Siberia, and to the Urals—to the brains of the planet: to the areas of the Tatars, Maris, Chuvashs, Erya, Moksha, Udmurts, and Bashkirs,” that is, to Povolzhya. In his opinion, this transformation is linked to the fact that

the Mari are the only nation in the world who have passed through all the stages in the development of civilization, adopting everything new and best during all administrations, stages, and epochs and no matter how difficult it has been, never losing their own national originality, worldview, philosophy, religion, language, culture.⁴⁴

Some priests have their own scientific or pseudo-scientific interpretations that are informed by a wish to adjust Mari “village faith” to the industrial era. For example, according to the *kart* of the village Pochinok-Kuchuk “the waves from the sacrificial fire and from the candles attain gods. Gods also receive signals from the earth in the form of electro-magnetic waves.” Thereby, the *kart* argues, “the vibration of plasma that originates from the sacrificial fire transforms through sound vibration into electro-magnetic waves.”⁴⁵

In that way, the “Mari popular faith,” intentionally or unintentionally, is attached to a New Age cultural context by its leaders. Mari Paganism is also universalized: it is perceived to contain universal religious truths that are meaningful for the whole of humanity. Moreover, there are some attempts

to give to Mari Paganism the highest status by emphasizing its ancient nature and ecological aspects, spirituality and other characteristics that are appealing to contemporary people.

Mari religious leaders are also motivated by a wish to become established in the international social and political sphere and to consolidate their position in the international Pagan movement. Therefore, the process of the unification and universalization of the Mari popular faith is also connected with the contemporary international cultural contacts that the Mari have. This development is also due to the exchange of experience that takes place at international social-political and scholarly conferences as well as visits from folkloric ensembles from European and Asian countries. In these and other events of cultural exchange, the Mari enrich their faith with ideas borrowed from other Pagan and syncretic traditions.

As a consequence of their wide international contacts and the increased cooperation between European and Finno-Ugric countries, many Mari Pagans endorse progressive standards for human rights and freedom of conscience. In presenting Mari aspirations to religious leadership and the universal applicability of their ideology, the Mari are inevitably drawn toward liberalization, because the increased experience of coexistence with and adjustment to other religious traditions.

CONCLUSIONS

By positing a new universal harmony, Mari Paganism has also become a form of “political Paganism,” that aspires to influence a broader sphere of social thinking in the Mari El Republic and the Russian Federation. Furthermore, the role of such a religion in the contemporary national-political identity of the Mari is growing. The process of revitalizing the local Pagan beliefs and rituals of the people is predominantly happening from above, guided by the Mari intelligentsia that is often oriented toward national-political interests.

Such a situation also leads to the reconsideration of their relationship with Christianity. Increasingly often, Mari Pagans see Christianity as an obstacle that hinders them in expressing their own uniqueness. While the Mari Pagans of Kirovskii region and of Tatarstan continue to have a more-or-less positive attitude toward Christianity, the urban Mari intelligentsia from Yoshkar-Ola have set for themselves the task of purifying their faith of Christian influence. At the same time, they are willing to embrace elements of various distant religious traditions as long as these are not connected to Christianity and appear to be as ancient as possible.

It can be suggested that by the process of “upgrading” the Mari faith, many characteristics of “dual faith” are likely to disappear or become primarily framed instead as features of popular Mari Orthodox Christianity which continues to accept syncretic folk traditions as “their own.” We may

observe that, in exchange for the old folk “dual faith,” we are now seeing a multi-religious syncretism, but unlike in the historical case of the arrival of Orthodox Christianity together with annexation into the Russian Empire, this new dynamic is not compelled from outside, but comes from the Mari themselves. And this means that this multi-religious syncretism will present a persistent phenomenon, at least for the nearest future.

NOTES

1. The Mari El Republic is an administrative unit of the Russian Federation. As such, it was created in 1990 as the successor to the Mari Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of the USSR. In the 2002 census of the Russian Federation, 604,000 people identified themselves as Mari.
2. D. Zelenin, *Kama i Vyatka: Putevoditel' i etnograficheskoe opisaniye Prikamskogo kraya* (Yur'ev: Tip. Ed. Bergmana, 1904), 168. The Mari adherence to the ways of their ancestors was noted by earlier observers as well. See, for example, Captain Rychkov's travel diaries from 1770 to 1772. N. P. Rychkov, “Dnevnye zapyski puteshestviya kapitana N. P. Rychakova po raznym provintsiyam Rossiiskogo gosudarstva,” in the State Archive of Kirov area, fund 170, opis 1, delo 383, list 7. I am grateful to ethnographer V. A. Korshunkov for pointing this source to me.
3. A. Ivanov, “Vsemariiskie yazycheskie moleniya v 20-kh godakh XIX veka,” *Finno-ugrovedenie* 2–3 (1999), 31–3. A. A. Andrievskii, “O vsemariiskom yazycheskom molenii 1828 goda v Vyatskoi gubernii,” A. G. Ivanov (ed., intro.), *Mariiskii arkheoraficheskii vestnik* 9 (1999), 173.
4. After the collapse of the Soviet Union the spring at Kyupryan Sola was cleaned up and a big prayer event was held at the same spot, 170 years after the earlier, famous sacrifice. N. S. Popov, “Na mariiskom yazycheskom molenii,” *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie* 3 (1996), 130–45.
5. V. V. Napol'skikh. “Bulgarskaya epokha v istorii finno-ugorskikh narodov Povolzh'ya i Predural'ya,” in *Istoriya tatar s drevneishikh vremen v semi tomakh. Vol. 2: Volzhskaya Bulariya i Velikaya Step*, Usman Mirkasy (ed.) (Kazan': Rukhiyat, 2006), 100–105.
6. V. M. Vasil'ev, *Mariiskaya religioznaya sekta “Kugu Sorta”*, Krasnokokshaisk: Marobizdat, 1927.
7. E. V. Chemyshev, “Gosudarstvenno-konfessional'naya politika v RME [Respublika Marii El]: sostoyanie i perspektivy,” in *Etnicheskaya kul'tura narodov Volgo-Kam'ya: traditsii, transformatsii i sovremennyye protsessy. Sb. materialov Vserossiiskoi nauchno-prakticheskoi konferentsii (12–13 November 2009)* (Yoshkar-Ola: Mari State University, 2009), 435–6.
8. N. S. Popov & A. I. Tanygin, *Yumyn iula* (Yoshkar-Ola: RUR, 2003), 132–40.
9. Chemyshev, “Gosudarstvenno-konfessional'naya politika v RME.” See also V. Shabykov, “Sovremennaya etno-religioznaya situatsiya v Respublike Marii El,” *Karadeniz Dergi*, www.karadenizdergi.com/ruski.
10. Filatov S. “Yazycheskoe vozrozhdenie—povolzhskaya religioznaya initsiativa,” in *Religiya i obshchestvo: Ocherki religioznoi zhizni sovremennoi Rossii*, S. B. Filatov (ed.) (Moscow: Letnii Sad, 2002), 139.
11. Vasil'ev, *Mariiskaya religioznaya sekta “Kugu Sorta”*, 18–19. See also S. K. Kuznetsov, *Kul't umershikh i zagrobnye verovaniya lugovykh cheremis* (Vyatka: Gubern. tip., 1907).
12. See also V. V. Napol'skikh, *Kaka Vukuze stal sozidatelem sushi: Udmurtskii mif o sovremenii zemli i drevneishaya istoriya narodov Evrazii* (Izhevsk, 1993).

13. Interview with Yambulatov; field material by the author, gathered in the expeditions organized by archbishop Aleksandr Kuznym from the department of religious education and catechesis of the Russian Orthodox Church in 2007.
14. G. E. Shkalina, *Traditsionnaya kul'tura naroda mari* (Yoshkar-Ola: Mariiskaya kn. izdatel'stvo, 2003), 74.
15. Piyambar is Yumo's younger daughter. According to the legend, Piyambar was also allowed to visit Earth and to walk a little. She saw white Mari-people, who wore white clothes. On the Earth Piyambar and the Great Mountain Person fell in love and got married, but the legends do not mention Piyambar as the ancestor or any tribes as her descendants. Furthermore, according to the myth, Maris already existed in the times when Piyambar visited the Earth. However, Piyambar is perceived as a patron of Mari women. L. S. Toidybekova, *Mariiskaya mifologiya* (Yoshkar-Ola: MPIK, 2007), 190.
16. Interview with Tamara Kurochkimina, 16 July 2009.
17. Chotkar Patyr is a national Mari hero and a giant *bogatyr*. When it was a time for him to die, he asked to be buried on the high shore of Ilet'-river and promised to be close to people to help them in troubles. He also asked not to allow his grave to be disturbed without reason, and once his request was ignored, Chotkar Patyr was offended and went deeply on Earth. After that Mari people underwent a lot of grief, misfortunes and they asked for Chotkar Patyr, but he didn't answer any more. However, it is believed that when a giant arises again, a Mari nation will flourish. This myth is included in the national Mari ballet *Zhivoy Kamen'* ("a vivid stone"). See Toidybekova, *Mariiskaya mifologiya*, 259.
18. According to the legend, during his time was developed the forms of worship and sacrifice that have remained throughout centuries. See Toidybekova, *Mariiskaya mifologiya*, 260–62.
19. *Ibid.*
20. For a more detailed discussion, see L. Shemier (V. N. Kozlov), "So shchitom na shchite. Slovo sostoitelya," in *Poltysh—knyaz cheremisskii. Malmyzhskii krai*, Laid Sheimer (ed.) (Yoskar-Ola: Tsentru-muzei im. Valentina Kolumba, 2003); N. S. Popov, "Pamyat' sokhranitsya na veky," in *Poltysh—knyaz cheremisskii. Malmyzhskii krai*, Laid Sheimer (ed.) (Yoskar-Ola: Tsentru-muzei im. Valentina Kolumba, 2003).
21. Interview with Tanygin on 2 May 2008.
22. *Cheremisy* is an older Russian term for the Mari people, sometimes used in English as well.
23. I. N. Smirnov, *Cheremisy: Istoriko-etnograficheskii ocherk* (Kazan': Tip. Un-ta, 1889), 214.
24. The reverence for Friday possibly reveals an Islamic influence. However, it should be noted that some forms of Christianity have a Friday fast. Many local ethnic-Mari Christians as well as double-believers fast very strictly. They may not visit church, but they never fail to fast.
25. M. F. Kosarev, *Osnovy yazycheskogo miroponimaniya: Po sibirskim arkhologo-etnograficheskim materialam* (Moscow: Ladoga-100, 2003), 21. On St Nicholas, see, for example, V. A. Korshunkov, "Kolya: Mariiskaya yazycheskaya fenomenologiya, mifologiya, zoologiya," in *Dukhovnaya kul'tura fino-ugorskih narodov: Materialy Vserossiiskoi nauch. Konf. K 80-letiyu Anatoliya Konstantinovicha Mikusheva (1–3 noyabrya 2006 g., g. Syktyvkar)*, T. S. Kanev (ed.) (Syktyvkar: StyktU, institut yazyka, lit-ry i istorii Komi NTs YrO RAN, 2007), 59–63.
26. I. V. Zykov, *Religioznye techeniya sredi mariitsev* (Nizhnii Novgorod: Ogiz, 1932); Korshunkov, "Kolya," 59–63.
27. Saint Varsonophius, a sixteenth-century Orthodox bishop of Tver in the Volga region.
28. An important local icon of the Virgin Mary, reputed to have been miraculously discovered in 1579.

PART II: COUNTRY STUDIES

29. Smirnov, *Cheremisy*, 211.
30. Toidybekova, *Mariiskaya mifologiya*, 49.
31. *Ibid.*, 171–2.
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.* The question about the origins of Mari holiday is very complex. It is well known that many Christian holy days were placed on the days of Pagan festivals. However, contemporary Mari traditions were formed later, under Muslim and Christian influence. It is clear that most of the Mari holy days are not Christian-derived and not Christian in essence. Nevertheless, the Mari calendar was incorporated in Christian calendar or correlated formally during forced Christianization.
34. Some Maris celebrate Shorykiol on the Christian holiday (6 January) and others celebrate it on the solstice (22 December), and others starting on the nearest Friday. The celebration is 12 days long.
35. Toidybekova, *Mariiskaya mifologiya*, 124.
36. Interview with Tanygin, 2 May 2008.
37. The word means “to beat” or “to put out an alien.”
38. Interview with Nikolai Zaitsev, 3 July 2009.
39. In Mari language, there is no equivalent word to “paganism” that Maris would avoid. Nevertheless, there is the term “*Marla vera*” (Marla faith), which Maris gladly use.
40. Boris Knorre & Elena Konestantinova, “Mariiskaya narodnaya vera i bor’ba mari za natsional’nye interesy v poslednee 10-letie,” *Russian Review (Keston Institute)* 2 (2010).
41. This title is mainly political by nature. Laid Shemier was the *On’yzha* before Tanygin.
42. S. S. Novikov, *Marii sugyn: Shochmo kalyknan tynya umylymashyzhe, yumyn iulazhe, pagyt eda tolyn shogysho pairenzhe-vlak nergen* (Yoshkar-Ola: GUP Gazeta Marii El, 2005), 148.
43. V. A. Aktsorin (ed.) *Marii kalyk oipogo: Mariiskii fol’klor: Mify, legendy, Marla kalendar’* (Yoshkar-Ola: Mariiskoe kn. izdatel’stvo, 1991), 146–7.
44. V. Tanakov, *Zhrets govorit*, cited in I. Smirnov, “Natsionalisticheskie kompaniya,” *Russkaya liniya* (14 December 2006), www.rusk.ru/analitika/2006/12/04/nacionalisticheskie_kamlaniya.
45. Meeting with Yambulatov on 16 July 2007.

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