

Folk Belief and Media Group  
of the Estonian Literary Museum  
Estonian Institute of Folklore

# **Folklore**

Electronic Journal of Folklore  
Vol. 48

Edited by  
Mare Kõiva & Andres Kuperjanov

Tartu 2011

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Electronic version is supported by Estonian Science Foundation (grant no. 8137). Printed version is supported by state programme projects EKKM09-168 and EKKM09-170.

Indexed in EBSCO Publishing Humanities International Complete, Thomson Reuters Arts & Humanities Citation Index, MLA International Bibliography, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, Internationale Volkskundliche Bibliographie / International Folklore Bibliography / Bibliographie Internationale d'Ethnologie, DOAJ, C.E.E.O.L.

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EKM Teaduskirjastus/ELM Scholarly Press  
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ISSN 1406-0957

*[www.folklore.ee/folklore](http://www.folklore.ee/folklore)*

# RITES ASSOCIATED WITH CONJURING RAIN IN THE UDMURT CALENDAR CYCLE

*Tatiana Vladykina, Galina Glukhova*

**Abstract:** Several archaic features of interpreting the surrounding world are still present in Udmurt folk culture. Calendar-related customs and feasts still preserve the oldest elements on all levels of rituals: in activities, artefacts, verbal and acoustic fields, etc. The dismissal of pests and caterpillars, and their wedding rituals, are deeply rooted in calendar customs. The thorough study of the codes of these rituals would help to determine the semantics of rituals, ascertaining the synchronic-diachronic aspects of the calendar and provide an integral imagination with regard to the mythopoetic foundations of popular worldview. Relying on the analysis of the specificity of Udmurt calendar feasts and customs, it becomes obvious that the tradition of warding off insects and caterpillars takes place in different seasons and is an inseparable part of the calendar cycle. Having analysed the specificity of Udmurt calendar feasts and customs, the rituals associated with the dismissal of insects is intrinsically polyfunctional, whereas the most archaic feature therein is the idea of conjuring the rain.

**Key words:** conjuring the rain, Udmurt folk tradition, warding off/wedding of insects and pests, Water Mother

Several archaic features of interpreting the surrounding world have been preserved in Udmurt traditional culture. The rituals regulating the behaviour of human beings in nature and society have actually remained in the focus of social and spiritual life. Up until today, calendar customs and feasts have maintained the oldest elements of rituals at all levels: in activities, artefacts, verbal and acoustic parts, etc. Thorough study of the different codes of rituals helps to ascertain the semantics of these rituals, determine the synchronic-diachronic calendar related aspects, and provide an integral picture of the mythopoetic foundation of the popular worldview. The observation of the specificity of Udmurt calendar feasts and customs, in the context of traditional culture, enables to see their functioning from a new side and solve various worldview-related and culturological problems. The aspects of Udmurt folk calendar have been studied by researchers since the end of the 19th century (Vereshchagin 1886 [1995], 1889 [1996]; Pervukhin 1880–1888; Gavrilov 1891; Vasil’ev 1906; Perevozchikova 1993; Vladykin 1994; Khristoliubova 1995; Vladykina 1998; Minniakhmetova

2000 and others). In this article, we observe the rituals for conjuring rain, which have so far been unfortunately been given little attention. Such rituals comprise *нумыр келян/сюан* – ‘sending away/weddings of vermin’, *урбо келян/сюан* – sending away/warding off/weddings of bedbugs. Traditionally, these rituals are conducted according to the relevant need, the content and terminology of the ritual are directly focused on the extermination of the insects, without any other hidden purpose. In the light of new data, folk calendar related customs and wedding rituals, together with the mythological semantics of the inherent elements, can be reviewed in order to redefine the functional determination of the above-mentioned rituals. As the details of these rituals are of great significance, let us further focus on the local versions.

## CUSTOMS CONCERNING INSECTS AND VERMIN

The ritual of “the survival of bedbugs” has been recorded in the 19th century from among the Udmurts of the Sharkan area (currently one of the central regions of Udmurtia); this ritual was conducted on the night prior to Holy Thursday, and it was believed, in order for it to be effective, that the ritual had to be conducted by an expert or at least a person who had learnt this practice from an expert (Vereshchagin 1995: 112). On the night of Holy Thursday or early in the morning, before dawn, the lady of the house invited the expert to look for bedbugs (*урбо утчаны*), who turned the found insects (no less than three) into white canvas and tied this as a knot on top of the rod, and hung a copper bell lower down on the stick. Thereafter, he sat astride on the rod, as if on a horse and “rode” towards the river, singing a wedding song (Vereshchagin 1995: 112–114).

The relevant ritual among the Udmurts living in the territory of today’s Tartar was the wedding of bedbugs (*урбо сюан*). Several women gathered in a house, and one of them was decorated as a bride (*виль кышно*), whereas the obligatory element of clothing was a large headscarf with thrums (*быркенчи*). Thereafter, imitating a wedding procession, they moved from house to house and collected bedbugs in a box. After finishing the movement through yards, the “bride” was put on the sledge (in winter) or a wagon (in summer) and was taken to the valley or ravine behind the village where she began to lament:

*Монэ татсы кытсы куштыса кельтиды?*

*Кинлы ванды ти монэ?*

Why did you leave me here?

Who did you bring me here for?

The others ran away and left her there alone. She sat there in silence for a while, then threw the box with bedbugs in the ravine and returned to the village.

In one of the variants (current Kiiasovskii region in the southern part of the Udmurt Republic), a bug was put into an old birch-bark shoe, people headed towards the river while singing a wedding song (*сюан гур*) and then threw the shoe, with the bedbug therein, into the water (Vladykin & Churakova 1986: 125).

Another ritual, practised by the Northern Udmurts in the summer-time was the sending away of cabbage-worms (*нумыр келян*) – for this purpose, 10–20 children and some old women came together and, when moving after each other along the furrows in the vegetable garden of each participant, they picked up worms from cabbage leaves and put them into an old worn birch-bark shoe. When walking through all vegetable gardens, the women unpleated their hair, and tinklers or wooden cowbells were put around children's necks. Accompanied with noise, shouting and bell-ringing, the procession moved to the pond, trying not to drop any of the cabbage-worms. Then, standing on the foot-bridge and singing a wedding song, the birch-bark shoe was thrown into the water. The participants came back in silence, attempting not to make any noise at all.

The above-described is similar to the caterpillar wedding (*нумыр сюан*) practiced prior to Midsummer among the Udmurts in Zavialovsk area. In the evening, the entire village gathered in a vegetable plot of one of the inhabitants. Women wore folk costumes and put on colourful headscarves, and men had to wear a colourful shirt and cap. A large table was put in the vegetable garden, covered with a white tablecloth. The table was laid with bread, salt, vegetables (potatoes, tomatoes, cucumbers) and fresh honey. Everyone stood around the table and tasted the food, and the merrymaking part commenced after this. Young people took a cabbage leaf in one hand and a poppy flower in the other, and sang:

*Коркалэн шулдырез нэнэй-дядяй вань чоже, / Азбарлэн но шулдырез  
пинальёс но вань дыръя. / Кенослэн но шулдырез нылъёс но вань  
дыръя. / Возь выллэн но шулдырез выль кенак но вань чоже. /  
Ульчалэн но шулдырез гырлыё вал вань дыръя. / Бакчалэн но шулдырез  
мак сяська вань дыръя. / Мусо, мусо, кудое, кочон кудое, / Эшшо но  
мусо кубиста туклячие. / Кибыдэ но нумырдэ ми съорамы нуомы. /  
Зечсэ ми бакчае кельтомы, / Уродзэ съорамы басьтомы. / Пячи но  
вань, бадзым но вань, / Ваньды уल्याськелэ ми съоры*

It is joyful in the cabin when mom and dad are alive, / it is jolly outside  
when children are in the yard. / It is joyful inside as long as girls are

there./ Meadows are pretty as long as there are brides./ The street is merry with horses and bells (on the shaft-bow)./ The beauty of the garden is in blooming poppies./ Handsome and pretty is my best man cabbage root,/ even sweeter is the cabbage-in-law./ Insects and worms we take with us./ Leaving everything that is good in the garden,/ taking all bad with us./ Here are the young, here are the old,/ let us all come with us.

While singing, elderly women walked along furrows and picked cabbage worms.

Conclusions can be made from the described cases that the warding off of insects and cabbage worms was strictly limited to the period from the Holy Thursday to Midsummer. According to ancient beliefs, the Holy Thursday was the threshold of the New Year. People believed that on this night the deceased would come to visit those alive, ghosts would wonder about (*жобъёс, ишанъёс*), and witches become active. There were certain practices to keep away from the evil force and send it back to the otherworld (e.g. the ritual for ousting the devil – *шайтан ульян / урай*). The beginning of the week, up until the Holy Thursday was the time for cleaning the abodes of people and the surrounding environment. Village women organised joint workdays (*веме*), and washed the floors, ceilings and walls in every house, one after another. Thus, in this context it is not accidental that the period for warding off insects is directly associated with the cleaning rituals of the Holy Thursday (cf. the “funerals” of insects and the warding off of pests among the Komi: Mikushev 1973: 36; Latysheva *et al.* 2009: 29–31).

## THE AGRICULTURAL YEAR OF THE UDMURTS

According to Udmurt (agricultural) folk calendar, the year was generally divided into two parts: both spring and autumn were considered the beginning of the new year. In the 19th century, Grigorii Vereshchagin wrote that the Udmurts count the new year from the time when field work starts: “Although they [Udmurts] refer to the first day of January as the New Year (*выль ар*), it does not mean anything to them; this date is called the New Year merely because of the fact that civil servants and all fixed-date services commence and end on this day.” (Vereshchagin 1995: 35)

The customs associated with the spring-time new year involve the rituals of ploughing the first furrow (*Акашка/Акаяшка/Гырыны потон/Геры поттон* – ‘going to plough, plough feast’), and are actually amalgamated with Christian Easter *Быдзыннал/Великтэм/Паска*). The celebration of the New Year in au-

tumn, however, has preserved fragmentally in Udmurt folk tradition. Some of the Northern Udmurts are still using the parallel corresponding terms for spring-summer and autumn-winter periods: *ВУ ВЬЛЫН СЫЛОН* ('standing on water', August 19) and *ЙО ВЬЛЫН СЫЛОН* ('standing on ice', August 19). Thus, we could presume that the period from Holy Thursday to approximately mid-August was dealt with as a whole year in old Udmurt tradition. In other words, the autumn-winter half-year and the spring-summer half-year were understood as independent time units. The fact that both of these semi-annual periods were seen as a separate year is proved in the expression used by the Northern Udmurts: *ГУЖЕМЕН-ТОЛЭН УЛЫНЫ* ('to live through a summer and winter'), which actually means to live a whole year (cf. with the Russian expression *СКОЛЬКО ЛЕТ, СКОЛЬКО ЗИМ* 'many summers, many winters'). Each half-year was considered full and whole. Upon the conversion to Christianity, these half-years were merged and the St. Elijah's Day was regarded as the beginning of the autumnal half-year. This can be presumed from the Udmurt word *ВЫЛЬ/ВИЛЬ НУНАЛ* ('new/ new day'), (nowadays, this term is solely associated with the fresh-harvested crop) which explicitly indicates the beginning of a new cycle after the summer solstice (*ИНВОЖО*). This argument is also supported by the fact that the Udmurt notion *ар* ('year, time') has a counterpart in the Komi language where *ар* [ar] denotes autumn (Alatyrev 1988: 98–99).

It was probably due to the seasonality of the "sending away of insects" and their late association with the cleaning rituals why the former are solely interpreted as warding off-rites. However, the relevant archaic semantics is revealed when observing the allocation of roles among the participants, the attributes, musical accompaniment and the symbolic imagery of the songs.

The wedding related symbolism of the observed rituals is particularly explicit: the ritual is an imitation of a wedding procession (a rod with a bell instead of the horse, a female participant dressed as a bride, women dragging the sledge with a "bride"), accompanied by wedding songs. The abundance of wedding plots and symbols in the given examples is "on one hand conditioned by typological similarity [thereof] with family and calendar feasts and rites of passage: there are records of local variants of autumnal masked imitations of wedding procession; wedding songs have an important place in Shrovetide customs. [...] Likewise, the autumnal commemoration ritual, sacrificing the head or legs of a cow or a horse (*ЙЫР-ПЫД СЁТОН*) is also accompanied by wedding melodies." (Vladykina 2006: 54) On the other hand, the wedding theme has probably become actualised as a polysemantic ritual-magical set of customs to ward off insects, the main function of which used be the conjuring of the rain. The initial idea of this tradition disappeared in the time-wise later strata along with the loss of archaic mythological beliefs. However, this initial idea did not

disappear from calendar rituals the aim of which was to prevent drought. Differently from other “more understandable” rituals, this occurred to be most saturated with symbols.

## PRESERVING WATER BODIES AND CONJURING THE RAIN

Before the start of spring at the beginning of the agricultural calendar, the Udmurts attempted to avoid a potential accident. Nearly all the prayers and charms of the spring-summer-time calendar feasts include an appeal to gods to send rain (зор) or humidity (мускыт): “... Гужем нуналын шуныт-лэськыт нунальёстэ ке сётсал, небыт зорьёстэ сётсал ке...” ‘If you could give warm and soft days in summertime, warm rainfalls if you could send...’ (Vasil’ev 1906: 341–342).

To preserve indispensable humidity, Udmurts appealed directly to elemental forces, springs of water. A characteristic example of this is the ritual of the Northern Udmurts conducted during the break-up of ice on rivers – the sending away of ice (йо келян). The entire village, dressed in festive garments, goes to the riverside, with ritual food and drinks. After sacrificing, people start to host each other and entertain themselves on the bridge. The aim of the feast and sacrifice is to bring a treat to the rivers (куасьмылысьтэм мумыос – ‘never-drying mother-rivers’, визыл бызись ю-шур мумыос – ‘foremothers of peacefully flowing rivers’) (Pervukhin 1880–1888: 9–10), and afterwards a prayer is uttered to the spirit of the river (ву-кузё/вумурт) to give water to people and the herds, wet the fields and avoid drought and famine, fires and epidemics. The most important part of this water cult concerns the attitude towards the springs of water, and this was actualised during summer solstice (инвожо-дыр). The status of springs, their sacredness is underlined by rules forbidding the desecration of the bodies of water: “It is not allowed to do laundry in our spring: thunder would come.” Outbursts of diseases (boils and sloughs on the human body) were explained as violations of prescriptions (taboo). According to folk belief, the springs need particular attention during “dangerous” times. At mid-day it was forbidden to fetch water with a sooty cauldron or to make noise at the spring. A custom has been recorded from among the Northern Udmurts that water was not fetched until four o’clock p.m., and the spring was covered with a white tablecloth as protection from the “evil” Sun during a dangerous transitional period.

Drought was considered to be the punishment of gods for the violation of generally valid norms, for incomplete adherence to calendar rituals and was attempted to be resolved by the rite to conjure up rain (зор курон). This was



basically the only episodic ritual, within the agricultural calendar, practiced pursuant to a relevant need. It was presumed that ritual-magical acts would bring about the desired outcome: old women and children poured water on each other at the riverside and pushed each other into the water; in some occasions, a black or grey ram was taken to the riverside and pushed into the water; in the village, the passers-by were soaked and even poured over; even houses, fences and gates were splashed with water. Soil was taken from the bottom of the spring and thrown at each other and window panes; mud was not wiped from the windows as it had to be the rain to do this. A somewhat more modest variant of the conjuring of the rain is ritual eating of porridge (*Жук снён*), when one or two elderly women gathered five-to-six-year-old children to the riverside, made porridge in a large pot and “gave” this to the river and the participants in the ritual.

The customs associated with the conjuring of the rain would not be complete without the ritual for warding-off insects, the symbolism of which combines intertwined archaic and newer layers, becoming especially evident in the relevant action (cf. with similar materials regarding Slavic culture: Gura 1995a: 491; Gura 1995b: 355; Gura 2004: 370–371).

Such manipulations with insects (gathering them in an old birch-bark shoe, box, cloth, cabbage leave; throwing them into the river or ravine) reveal the ancient layers of the religious worldview about the polysemantic connection between the water and its masters, reconstructed on the basis of old incantation texts. The waters above the ground are under the protection of the water spirit (*вумурт* – ‘water man’) of relatively later origin; the celestial water in heaven – creative, first-born – is under the protection of celestial ancestress Water Mother (Northern Udmurt *Ю-Кылчин*, Southern Udmurt *Инву-мумы/Инву*):

*Быдзым Иньмарлы, Кылчинлы, Ю-Кылчинлы, Мумы-Кылчинлы, Музьем-мумылы пияз пониськом, мед далтытоз! Зеч ардэ сёт, шуныт уйдэ сёт, шуныт зордэ сёт, лысвудэ сёт...!*

To great Inmar, Creator-Kylchin, to Water-Ancestress/Water – Creative Mother, to mother-ancestor, mother-earth we put [a sacrifice] in her bosom, let [the crop] grow! Give a good year, give warm nights, give warm rain, give dew...! (Wichmann 1893: 123–124)

Invu (celestial water/moist) is also the protector of kinship. In several local traditions, people appealed to him, besides the trinity of upper gods and the deities of kinship (*Будзым Инмаре, Инэ-вуэ, воршудэ...* ‘Great Inmar, Ine-vue [great celestial water], Vorshude’). The prayer was accompanied with whistling, whereas the tune played at the moment of uttering the prayer was called

*инву утчан гур* ('the tune to search for celestial water'). The same tune was played when the *tuno* (*туно* – 'shaman, soothsayer') fell into a trance during the ritual when was choosing a successor to himself. Invu was approached to receive blessing for clairvoyance, during the foretelling practice, when choosing a sacrificial site and determining the sacrificial animal. The melody of celestial moist (*Инву гур*) was performed during the furrow-feast (*Гершыд*), denoting the end of spring-time field work. The imagination of celestial water (*invu*) thus contains the idea of divine blessing granted by an ancestor. Might be that it is indeed this particular idea that is the wedding related element in the ritual for conjuring the rain, as one of the main characters assumes the role of the bride/young married woman (*Виль Кен*). The absence of this character is compensated with the wedding tune accompanying the ritual. The erotic symbolism of the songs sung at this moment (comparison of male and female genitals with vegetables – cabbage root or cabbage) might, in our view, convey the same idea. The hypostasis of the Water-Mother is revealed more clearly in using cabbage worms in the rituals for conjuring the rain, as the image of cabbage-vulva is a permeating feature in Udmurt calendar related customs (particularly frequent in autumnal masking songs; the stuffed Shrovetide bogey is also referred to as Auntie Cabbage).

The female water deity is polyfunctional and multi-faceted in the culture of a number of peoples (Rabinovich 1987). The anthropomorphic figure of Invmumy (celestial Mother Water) was probably preceded by her archaic hypostasis – a water snake, the mundane projections of which were insects (bedbugs, vermin) (Kozlova 2006: 40ff). The Udmurts gave a sacrifice to water, imitating, at the same time, the return to homely circumstances.

Proceeding from the above, it can be said that the customs concerning the sending away of insects are adjusted to specific seasons, the former being an inseparable part of the calendar cycle, therefore not random. The rituals for sending away insects are polyfunctional whereas the most archaic function is the idea to conjure the rain.

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