

## SCTCMG 2019

### International Scientific Conference «Social and Cultural Transformations in the Context of Modern Globalism»

#### CHUVASH RELIGION AS A KEY COMPONENT OF ETHNIC MENTALITY

Erbina Nikitina (a)\*, Dmitrii Vorobev (b), Tatiana Evgrafova (c)

\*Corresponding author

(a) Cheboksary cooperative institute, a branch of Russian University of Cooperation,  
Cheboksary, Russia, [erbina@rambler.ru](mailto:erbina@rambler.ru), 8-9033795852

(b) I. Yakovlev Chuvash State Pedagogical University, Cheboksary, Russia  
[vorobjov.d@gmail.com](mailto:vorobjov.d@gmail.com), 8-9176700147

(c) Cheboksary cooperative institute, a branch of Russian University of Cooperation,  
Cheboksary, Russia, [erbina@rambler.ru](mailto:erbina@rambler.ru), 8-9063889227

#### *Abstract*

Chuvash are Turkic people living in the Mid-Volga Region and having its own ethnic religion. The Chuvash religion called Sardash is preserved in everyday life as the “teaching of ancestors” and in praying and mythology. Sardash forms the basis for the centuries-old mentality of Chuvash by expressing moral values, principles of behaviour and endeavours of the nation. The ethnic religion of Chuvash has experienced several historic impacts, connected with Islamization/Tartarization and Christianization/russification. However, neither the Orthodox religion nor Islam has become central in the mentality of Chuvash. In everyday and ritual practices Chuvash are faithful to their ancient religion, based on the key principles of Zoroastrianism. The neo-paganism proclaimed as Chuvash ethnic religion by the “Typăç” group at the beginning of the 1990s is just an improvisation of a real traditional religion of Chuvash. In XXI Sardash still exists on a par with other religious traditions. The function of “spiritual support” of the nation is still played by yamakhats of unchristened Chuvash in Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Samara, Ulyanovsk, etc. The Chuvash adherence to the teaching of ancestors is explained by a necessity to survive in harsh climatic and demographic conditions, to keep centuries-old lifestyle and social arrangement, to strive for family and economic well-being. Today Sardash is a set of unwritten rules and norms, important for the self-identification of the nation. In modern conditions, the ethnic religion of Chuvash with its many rituals can become a mighty factor for the development of ethnic tourism in the Chuvash republic.

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**Keywords:** Ethnic religion, æthnic mentality, Chuvash people, Islam, Orthodox religion, Neo-paganism.



## 1. Introduction

Chuvash people are one of the Turkic nations (along with Gagauz, Yakut, Khakas and Altay people) whose predominant religion is Orthodox Christianity, but not Islam. The majority of the Chuvash people living in the Chuvash Republic of the Russian Federation are Orthodox Christians, though there are people who adhere to traditional beliefs or Islamic religion.

There is no accurate information about Chuvash who are neither Christian nor Moslems (чӑн чӑвашем – “true Chuvash”), but approximately they account for 5 thousand people (0.4% of all Chuvash). The majority of them live outside the Chuvash Republic: about 1 thousand people live in Samara region, 3.4 thousand people live in several Tatarstan districts, the rest live in Bashkortostan (more than 500 people) and Ulyanovsk region (Chuvashi, 2017). There is no information about “true Chuvash” of Siberia, the Far East and other regions of Russia.

The traditional religion of Upper Chuvash people is called Sardash (Nikitin, 2002). Sardash is preserved in the form of the “teaching of ancestors” (ваттисем калани), prayers and mythology, the stories and characters of which are represented in folk tales. The ancient religion of Chuvash is the basis for their centuries-old mentality and reflects moral values, principles of behaviour and endeavours of the nation.

## 2. Problem Statement

Chuvash faith (чӑваш тӗнӗ) is a full-fledged religious system with a pantheon of good and evil gods, headed by the main god Мӑн Тӑпӑ. There are also many gods of Bright and Lower worlds and developed worship practices. In XVIII all the kerems (shrines), kiremets (prayer places) and yamakhats (curacies) were destroyed after the suppression of Pugachev’s Rebellion. Religious leaders (muchavurs, epters, elmens, lampars) of Amaksar kiremet, which was one of the main yamakhats, were declared outlawed. They had to taboo the teaching and the pantheon of Chuvash gods (Nikitin, 1999). This taboo was cancelled only in 1990, which gave an insight into Chuvash ethnic religion.

The main religions of the Russian Federation that are Orthodox Christianity and Islam have had a great impact on traditional religions of non-Russian nations of the Mid-Volga region. Iskhakov (2013) declares that Christianity and Islam became a levelling factor in the spiritual and social worlds of native people as “they set another system of cultural and religious coordinates, the acquisition of which meant changes in the most important attitudes to life, welfare and ethnic identity” (p. 50). The process of nature-centred world view had a deep impact on cultural and psychological features of Chuvash people, who were involved in a long-lasting struggle between Christianity and Islam or, broadly speaking, between military and political centres of Kazan and Moscow (Ivanov, 2011).

Christianization and Islamization of Chuvash in XVIII-XIX centuries has led to a significant decrease in the territory where Chuvash religion was present. At the end of the XX century, there were only 40 settlements of unchristened Chuvash in the Ural-Volga region (before the WWI there were about 20 thousand of “true Chuvash”). With the increased influence of the Russian Orthodox Church in the XXI century, folk traditions were attacked with the purpose of purifying the faith from pagan remains. There is a constant criticism of Sardash ministers (ӑрӑмӑӑ, апӑс, мӑчавӑр, эльмень и эптер), the rituals of birth, funerals and commemoration, wedding ceremonies, farewell ceremonies before going to the army and

“akatur” (“sowing wedding”) mass celebrations are subject to interference. Despite this, modern Chuvash people living in villages adhere to the countryside and family ceremonial cycle of agricultural calendar that forms the centre of their traditional life order.

Thus, we think it is important to describe the role of the religious factor in the ethnic self-identification of Chuvash people in historic, social and cultural aspects and to show the place of traditional beliefs in the structure of Chuvash ethnic mentality.

### **3. Research Questions**

The problem proposed in this research is considered in three aspects: 1) the way traditional Chuvash beliefs interact with Orthodox Christianity; 2) the influence of Islam (the religion of Tartar and Bashkir) on the Chuvash mentality; 3) the functioning of Sardash in modern conditions.

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The aim of this research is to study the modern state of Chuvash ethnic religion as an element of collective identity and mentality of the nation. Sardash is a unique belief system, preserved since ancient times as a set of unwritten rules and norms, that are important for the world’s view, self-identification and daily life of Chuvash people.

### **5. Research Methods**

The research is based on the analysis of historical, ethnographic and folk sources and aimed at reconstructing the key ideas and principles of traditional Chuvash religion. The postulates of Sardash are determined based on the analysis of prayers, and charms (чѣлхесем), proverbs and sayings, wishful thinkings and ancient lexis of Chuvash language. To analyse the modern state of Chuvash ethnic religion we used the research works published in Russian and Chuvash languages in the post-USSR era.

There are not many works about Chuvash religious culture published in English sources. They deal with history and ethnography (Salmin, 2013, 2017; Tafajev, 2014), problems of the language (Marquardt, 2012; Alosi font & Tovar-García, 2014, 2015), education (Protasova, Alosi font, & Bulatova, 2014; Nikitina, Stanyal, & Trifonov, 2015), religious interaction and ritual activities (Salmin, 1995; Vovina, 2000b; Yagafova, 2011). There are no works about Chuvash ethnic religion in English. However, there are reviews that touch the topic of national religion revival in Chuvash Republic of 1990s (Filatov & Shchipkov, 1995; Vovina, 2000a; Shnirelman, 2002) and the most comprehensive analysis is given in the work of Vovina (2000a) «Building the road to the temple: Religion and national revival in the Chuvash Republic».

### **6. Findings**

Sardash still plays the role of a backbone for the mentality of Chuvash people. It comprises their world’s view and traditional culture of this ethnic group. Specialists, who studied Chuvash religion (Trofimov, 2009; Nikitin 2002) treat it as a fully-fledged, independent religious system which contains the

traces of Sumero-Akkadian, Hurrian, Jewish-Khazar, Arabo-Islamic, Byzantine-Christian cultures. Trofimov (2009) declares that “Chuvash ancestors were among developed civilizations and created rich cultural values. Their religion was Zoroastrianism” (p. 35). Traditional ceremonies and family customs of Chuvash people have parallels with the traditions of nations living in Dagestan, Osetiya, Balkar, Abkhazia, and Svaneti.

The ethnic religion of Chuvash people formed after primal beliefs, though it is based on them. That is why it is both resembling and not resembling polytheistic religions. Despite having a big number of gods Sardash is, in fact, the monotheistic system (Mesarosh, 2000). Its main god is Мӑн Топӑ (the Almighty) who is followed by good spirits in a strict order. The basis of Sardash is the recognition of good and evil forces, light and darkness, body and spirit and etc. Life is dualistic but the main value is the equality of all existing things in front of Топӑ and Sun, loyalty to the motherland (çӗршыв / land + water), social harmony and justice. The life values of Chuvash are loyalty to the precepts and the frame of reference of ancestors (“Chuvash people will disappear at the end of the world”). The true value is the reputation and honest name that we leave after us. The main attention is given to the spiritual world of people, their intelligence, feelings and will (“Each Chuvash is his own king”).

The ethnic religion of Chuvash has experienced several historic impacts, connected with Islamization/Tartarization (starting from the X and especially the XIII centuries) and Christianization/russification (starting from the XVI century). After Almushem, the ruler of Volga Bulgaria converted to Islam in 922, those committed to the old religion, who were called Suvazi (Chuvash), migrated to the right bank of the Volga led by Virig. Cheremis (Mari) and Aras (Udmurt) people went into the forests. However, Islam has been affecting the people of the Volga region for many years.

Studying the problem of Chuvash Islamization, some researchers (Aric, 2007; Yagafova, 2015; Salmin, 2017) note that it played a prominent role in the transformation of Chuvash ethnicity. They think Tartars, who ruled a part of Chuvash people, make them identify themselves as Tartars. Chuvash people who converted to Islam were named Tartars in written sources (Salmin, 2017). In some settlements of the Ural-Volga region, the Islamization resulted in full assimilation (religious, language and ethnic) of Chuvash people and resulted in the appearance of «янга мусулмэнлар» (new Muslims) using Tartar language and having specific self-identification (Yagafova, 2015).

The results of Chuvash Christianization were treated as negative by the beginning of the XX century. Nikolsky (2007) thoroughly analysed the critical period of the New-Bulgarian (Chuvash per se) era and the destruction of the structure of the Chuvash universe. He declared that the Orthodox religion introduced forcibly was a justification for the colonization of Chuvash land by Muscovy. Taymasov (2004) notes that not only did Christianity bring together the spiritual cultures of non-Russian and Russian nations, but led to the spiritual «russification» of the former. It is through Christian education that the multi-ethnic society of “Orthodox Russians” was formed. The educator Ivan Yakovlev put a lot of effort into the Christianization of Chuvash people. Thanks to his work the nation got Bible and religious service in its mother-tongue.

Sometimes Chuvash chose Islam as a sign of protest against forced Christianization. However, they returned back to their traditional beliefs with the first opportunity (Salmin, 2017). Those Chuvash people who had to convert to Christianity related the morality of the new religion to the aspects of traditional beliefs. As Denisov (1959) writes “despite their centuries-old efforts, missionaries couldn’t fully destroy

pagan beliefs and ceremonies in the life of peasants who converted to Orthodox Christianity” (p. 79). He calls this Chuvash “dual faith”.

Chuvash religion supported by the ancient mythological world’s view, including the original ideas about the creation of the world and the human spirit, came to close relationships with Orthodox Christianity. The accidental nature of Chuvash Orthodox religion was mentioned in the XIX century by the scientists specializing in Volga region nations. Also, there was an idea about the presence of Ancient Greece and Ancient Egypt religious elements in the beliefs of Chuvash people. It may be explained by the fact that ethnic religions, including Chuvash, have a high tolerance towards gods and dogmas of other religious systems (Nikolaev, 2010). Also, “the Chuvash view of the world is characterized by the desire not to break harmony in nature” and “the same principle was used in relations among people: *Çăkăp-răvar хире-хирёç* / Bread and salt are mutually related” and “it is this basis of full acceptance of life that surrendering to fate comes from” (Terentieva, 2012, p. 20).

There are a lot of ideas about why Chuvash people proffered Orthodox religion to Islam, unlike Tartar and Bashkir. However, Kappeler (2016) writes that sharp borders separated Chuvash from both Tartar and Russians – “people with another culture and huge social differentiation” (p. 71). Neither Orthodox religion nor Islam has become a backbone for the spiritual life and mentality of Chuvash. In the everyday and ritual practices, many Chuvash people are still loyal to their ancient religion, which is nature-centric, dualistic and based on the principles of Zoroastrianism and worshipping the Sun (Nikitin, 2002).

The researches of the post-Soviet era about the religious situation in the Volga and the Ural foothills regions mention several problems, including Tengriism revival among Turkic peoples, the creation of Chuvash Orthodox autocephaly, the appearance of neo-paganism under the guise of Chuvash ethnic religion, declared by the “*Typăç*” group. Some scientists think that Chuvash neo-paganism that started at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of 1990s is a result of Chuvash nationalism (Filatov & Shchipkov, 1995; Shnirelman, 2002; Khokhlov, 2016). This gives cause to blame Chuvash intellectuals in separatist sentiments.

Indeed, the activists of Chuvash National Congress tried to include the revival of folk traditions and customs in their programme. However, they didn’t support these new muchavurs, that had a stake on “modernized variant of paganism, based on European values and senses as well as technological advances of western civilizations” (Khokhlov, 2016, p. 138). Religious association “*Typăç*” is an artificial deviation from a true traditional religion of Chuvash people.

Despite the “neo-paganism project” didn’t take off in the Chuvash Republic, the Russian Orthodox Church and local authorities opposed all movements of Chuvash religion – ethnic religion, neo-paganism, and autocephaly. Nowadays, traditional religion remains in the mentality of the older generation predominately. The function of “spiritual support” of the nation is still played by yamakhats of unchristened Chuvash in Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Samara, Ulyanovsk, and other regions. As the supporters of ethnic religion strive to preserve the identity of Chuvash people, the traditional religious system still has a great influence on the mentality of Chuvash.

## 7. Conclusion

The ethnic religion of Chuvash has been under strong pressure due to social and economic changes of the XX century (urbanization, industrialization, the breakup of agrarian community and family groups) as well as the interaction with Orthodox and Muslim population. There has been a trend for the development of artificially created neo-paganism opposed to the ancient religion as well as for pushing into the secondary role the ceremonies in honour of supreme gods (land, water, sky, fire) and terrestrial good spirits (protectors of hearth “кил-йыш пӑтти”, household “карташ пӑтти”, home “хӗртсурт” and “пирӗшти”), honouring ancestors in “выйкилли”, destroying sacred places “киремет”, “керем”, “атан”, “ырӑ”, “выртан”.

Despite this adverse conditions Sardash still exists on a par with other religious traditions in the XXI century, demonstrating its potential. The Chuvash adherence to the teaching of ancestors and traditional believes is explained by a necessity to survive in harsh climatic and demographic conditions as well as a desire to keep centuries-old lifestyle and social arrangement, to strive for family and economic well-being. The conscious attitude of modern Chuvash to their history and culture, the interest for traditional believes and ceremonies, folk tales and language shows the growth of ethnic self-identification (Evgrafova, 2014).

In modern conditions, the ethnic religion of Chuvash with its many rituals can become a mighty factor for the development of ethnic tourism in the Chuvash Republic. Mikhoparov (2017) thinks that cultural and historical factors, including the celebration of traditional ethnic holidays, are very important for the development of tourism in the region. The “land of one hundred thousand words, one hundred thousand songs and one hundred thousand embroideries” (as Chuvash region is called) is hugely interesting because of its nation – Chuvash people that could preserve their unique culture, ancient traditions, original believes and native language.

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