

“WE CANNOT PRAY WITHOUT *KUMYSHKA*”:  
 ALCOHOL IN UDMURT RITUAL LIFE\*

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ABSTRACT

We trace the history of the uses of the alcoholic drink known as *kumyshka* among the Udmurt. Our focus is on *kumyshka*'s ritual uses both in public and domestic contexts in the second half of the 19th century, the early 20th century as well as the early 21st century. We suggest that *kumyshka* not only represents a site of resistance to the dominant religious regime, i.e. Russian Orthodoxy, but is also a tool for self-enhancement and identity making for this indigenous people in the Volga River basin in Central Russia. The consumption of *kumyshka* has been a frequent object of criticism in the accounts of Orthodox clergy, scholars, doctors, travellers and administrators. Most accounts show a moralising stance, which only occasionally reflects the local understandings behind its uses. As anthropologists working in the region, we compare these historical sources with the current practices. We discuss changes in the religious sphere as well as in gender roles related to the uses of *kumyshka*.

KEYWORDS: rituals • alcohol • gender • historical change • animism • Udmurts

INTRODUCTION

Our aim in this article is to analyse the data on the sacred uses of a homebrew called *kumyshka* in the past and reflect upon the changes that have taken place for over almost

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two centuries. We rely both on testimonies from older and newer written sources as well as on our own field materials.<sup>1</sup> We want to explain the importance of *kumyshka* in Udmurt culture, to find its roots and show its resilience, and its role in enhancing religious identity in the past and ethnic identity in the present. First, we will give a short overview of the historical context, then we shall focus on the process of making *kumyshka*, move to describing its ritual uses in the past and finally comment on the current period.

Why is this alcoholic drink a relevant issue to investigate? One of the aspects of Udmurt culture that impresses those who meet it for the first time is certainly everything that is related to alcoholic beverages. Unlike Russians, Udmurts usually do not drink vodka, but prefer a particular drink they brew themselves,<sup>2</sup> which has several names in Udmurt, more often *kumyshka*, more seldom *araky* or *kuryt vu* ('bitter water'), *udmurt vina* ('Udmurt wine'), or *pös'tem arak* ('boiled arak') (Kel'makov 2019: 127). This beverage is generously, often in an insisting manner, offered to all guests. So, drinking this brew is one of the first indigenous customs non-Udmurt meet with, and, as a consequence, one of the most common negative stereotypes about the Udmurt is related to drinking alcohol.

What is *kumyshka*? It is a moonshine without sugar, "using flour, beets, or potatoes instead" (Retish 2016: 143). Usually it is brewed by women, although this is not an absolute rule (Farmakovskiy 1879: 530; Vereshchagin 1886: 15, 28; Smirnov 1890: 115, 160; Semenov 1901: 40; Khristolyubova 2006: 44). Although drinking *kumyshka* was widespread in the 18th century, especially among non-converted or recently converted Udmurt, the topic features more frequently in 19th century texts<sup>3</sup> (Retish 2016; see also Taagepera 1999: 264, 267–8; Pislegin 2016). At the end of the 19th and the first third of the 20th century, clergy, scholars, doctors, travellers and administrators very much focused on it, and particularly on *kumyshka*'s nefariousness.<sup>4</sup> After the 1920s, *kumyshka* largely disappears from the literature (Vladykin and Khristolyubova 1997), to re-emerge at the beginning of the 21st century.

According to a legend, *kumyshka* is the first gift from the sky god Inmar. Inmar asked Keremet,<sup>5</sup> his brother, to teach the first men to make *kumyshka*, as a remedy against boredom (Buch 1882: 41; see also Vladykin and Khristolyubova 1997: 120). However, Keremet fouled the *kumyshka* and allowed sins and death to settle inside and the men started to use and abuse it without being saved from boredom. This is where the quarrel between the sky god and his brother began. The legend continues, saying that in the Golden Age, the sin that angers Inmar against men is also connected to *kumyshka*: Inmar gave man a wife, which was another remedy against boredom given on the condition that man would not drink anymore (Semenov 1901: 41). However, his curious wife discovered a container with the defiled *kumyshka* and drank from it. If anything, this legend, clearly inspired from the Bible, demonstrates the key role *kumyshka* plays in Udmurt cosmology.

This origin story determines *kumyshka*'s first and original use, as early authors emphasise: it is a necessary part of festive gatherings and religious ceremonies; and more importantly it is the Udmurts' sacred drink (Wasiljev 1902: 23; Luppov 1911a: XVI). In short, it is not so much led by consumerism or an inclination to get drunk, but by its high value and symbolism. Pre-Soviet authors, describing Udmurt rituals, mention in most of them the presence of *kumyshka* (for example Blinov 1898; Wasiljev

1902). This ritual importance is certainly one of the reasons why *kumyshka* had been perceived – both from the emic and from the etic points of view – to be an ethnicity marker (Kappeler 1982: 382). For the Udmurt, it was seen as a sign of the persistence of their own religion, which Russians called paganism (*yazychestvo*), and was a form of resistance to colonialism. This same resilience was not welcomed by the Russian Orthodox Church, which wanted to eradicate all traces of pre-Christian customs (Retish 2016: 142, 149, 158–159).

The tsar Ivan the Terrible, who transformed the Muscovite state into the Russian empire with the conquest of Kazan in 1552, gave the Udmurt the right to brew their own alcohol (Kreknin 1899: 557). However, this right was challenged several times throughout history.<sup>6</sup> With the beginning of the First World War and subsequent mobilisation, the tsar prohibited the sale of alcoholic beverages (*Obyazatel'noye* 1915: 72; *Zakrytiye* 2015: 56–58). In the following years, the prohibition was confirmed, starting a temperance campaign that lasted throughout the war and the Russian Revolution until 1923 (Retish 2016: 141, 155). The Udmurt resisted this by all traditional and non-traditional means. They also petitioned the central government, which responded by rejecting the petitions (Retish 2016: 148–149). But what shows how deep the discontent had grown is how Udmurts resorted to violence, even arguably killing state officials who attempted to interrupt the brewing of *kumyshka* (Zelenin 1904: 76; Mikheyev 1926: 41–48; Sirelius 2003 [1907]; Kulikov 2004: 195).

How did the early ethnographers or travellers see *kumyshka*? As the American historian Aaron Retish describes, *kumyshka* is presented as a light beverage, seen – as were the Udmurt presented by the colonialists' eyes – as primitive and of very low quality. Clearly, among alcoholic beverages, there was an 'official' hierarchy, in which homebrew is the lowest, and vodka is the highest. The theme of the colonial product's quality versus the colonial subjects' primitiveness and foul taste is not an original one. Both physicians and ethnographers insist on the dangerousness of *kumyshka* in comparison with the purity of vodka: *kumyshka* is brewed in unhealthy conditions and passed through copper pipes that left their poison in the drink. (Retish 2016: 147–152) The nefariousness for health is a frequent issue for many commentators (Kreknin 1899: 557; Sprenzhin 1900: 822; Zelenin 1904: 76).

Of course, the alterations to consciousness or heavy intoxication induced by the use of *kumyshka* are emphasised by most authors. Notwithstanding some slight differences, they all highlight how much the Udmurt drink, and some even argue that they are all almost permanently drunk (Farmakovskiy 1879: 530; Tr-iy 1912: 42). An example of this typical discourse is the following: "at festive times, they drink night and day. Everybody drinks, as a rule – men, women and girls, elder and younger, starting from seven years old, and there is not one Udmurt who would not drink." (Korobeynikov and Turanov 2008: 88) In characteristic colonial fashion, many observers, not able to recognise or accept the sacred dimension of *kumyshka*, argued that its consumption took place because of the irrational Udmurt addiction to drinking (see Werth 2002: 97). For example, one author argues that the only reason why the Udmurt make *kumyshka* is to get drunk (Gavrilov 1915: 1054). We fully agree with Retish, who has extensively discussed the topic, when he says that the Udmurt case can be seen in a more global politics of colonial representation. He writes that this image promoted the view that

colonial subjects were unable to control their desires for alcohol, especially indigenous alcohol, in contrast to the colonial elites, who could. It was this sensory primitivism – the hunger of the flesh and immediate sensation from drink – that separated colonial subjects from the colonisers. (Retish 2016: 141)<sup>7</sup>

#### SACREDNESS OF *KUMYSHKA*: A HISTORICAL ACCOUNT

The most documented use of *kumyshka*, especially in the past, is undoubtedly its use in rituals. *Kumyshka* was an organic part of Udmurt rituals. Ivan Mikheyev (1928: 151) wrote down the words of an elderly Udmurt man: “We pray with bread and *kumyshka*. We may not pray without *kumyshka*. And we cannot avoid making *kumyshka*, otherwise we should abandon all our ceremonies.” (See also Orlov 1999: 198) The same idea had already been expressed by Grigoriy Vereshchagin and others decades before Mikheyev. For instance, an Orthodox priest reports that Udmurts say “as long as there is no prohibition on *kumyshka* the Votyak faith will last” (Luppov 1911a: 441). Or as another clergyman reports in 1849, “among themselves they say, if a Votyak does not prepare *kumyshka*, he would die” (Luppov 1911b: 252; see also Luppov 1911a: 441; Kappeler 1982: 382; Taagepera 1999: 268). Vladimir Vladykin (1994: 112) summarises this idea like this: “in the Udmurts’ ritual life, in their prayer rituals, a particular role was played by a very special component, the *kumyshka*, a form of homemade vodka”. The *kumyshka* was a compulsory offering to the gods, for the priest (in Udmurt *vös’as’*) addressed the gods holding a bowl of *kumyshka* in his hands (*ibid.*). However, Ioann Vasil’yev observes that if there is no *kumyshka*, they will have to pray with beer (Wasiljev 1902: 95; see also Luppov 1927: 14).<sup>8</sup>

For some ceremonies, for example in the *kuala*<sup>9</sup> building, each family brings its own *kumyshka*. The priest prays while holding a bowl with a mixture of *kumyshka* and beer (Blinov 1898: 27–28), a detail that Vasil’yev confirms in all his ritual descriptions. In his field materials, the Finnish scholar Holmberg mentions prayers with *kumyshka* in *kualas* among the Eastern Udmurt (Sadikov 2019: 89).<sup>10</sup> The numerous descriptions of rituals reveal that there are many ways of using the brew depending on the ritual context. According to a very detailed overview of different kinds of Udmurt ritual, almost for all of them Vasil’yev observes the presence of *kumyshka*, as an offering to gods, in parallel with other offerings, blood sacrifices or just food. *Kumyshka* was also used in ceremonies in which living animals were not sacrificed as the main offering (Khrushcheva 1995: 184).

It has to be noted that there were some ceremonies where *kumyshka* was not present. Sometimes, in reports about rituals, it is specified that *kumyshka* is not allowed at all, for example in the case of a sacrifice of a red or chestnut colt, on June 7 and 8 (Nalimov 2010: 311). Nikolay Pervukhin (1888b: 61) mentions *chöz’ s’ion*<sup>11</sup> as a ritual where *kumyshka* is absent. Tellingly, Udmurt do not usually drink *kumyshka* at ceremonies of Tatar origin. However, there are contradictory reports about the ceremonies dedicated to Keremet, whose origin is also Turkic.<sup>12</sup>

Often older observers just mention that they prayed with *kumyshka*. But what does that mean? What do they do with it? Fortunately, we also have many precise descriptions, which allow us to figure out how precisely *kumyshka* was used in rituals. These

different uses have never been systematised, so we'll try to do this in the following section. But before, let us comment on who the users of *kumyshka* were in rituals.

The rituals were always under somebody's leadership, whom we shall call here the priest (*vös'as'*); also it was not only sacrificial priests who led ceremonies, for all men were, in some way, religious specialists in private settings. In most domestic rituals, the officiant was the head of the household, usually the husband and father.

How much was the officiant in a position to drink *kumyshka*, or even to get drunk? We shall see this later in more detail, but in a few cases the religious specialist was expected to be drunk. The alteration of consciousness due to *kumyshka* was also connected, in Udmurt understanding, with the sacred effect of the beverage. It allowed access to a kind of state in-between the worlds, between that which is 'our own' (the worldly, the profane) and the 'other' (the sacred, the divine) (Orlov 1999: 19). This is the case with some rituals that involve the *töro*,<sup>13</sup> the master of the ceremony. So, during the Easter week, the respected ancient *töro-vös'as'* was dragged along with utmost respect to all households.

The elected patriarch is transported on a coach or a sledge, seated over two feather pillows [...] Arriving to a home, the coachman knocks at a window and asks: "Will you let the *töro* in?" They enter the courtyard, the master offers *kumyshka* from a bottle to the *töro*, who does not move at all. The tour continues until the *töro* drops onto the pillows without his senses. (Blinov 1898: 29; see also Luppov 1927: 20.)

This may explain how, sometimes, sacrificial priests were drunk, as they were represented in drawings by Udmurt schoolchildren in the 1930s following the new Soviet ideological motifs.

On the other hand, there are other rituals in which the priest is expected not to be drunk; if he fails in this he will not be invited to conduct prayers again (FM: Tatarstan, 2017).

#### MAKING KUMYSHKA

We shall not detail here the technical process of the brewing as many ethnographers have described it in detail (see Buch 1882: 41; Vereshchagin 1886: 15–16; Sprenzhin 1900: 819–820). What is important to emphasise about *kumyshka* is that the production itself is a ritual. No commercial brew could ever replace it (Orlov 1999: 200). Thus, no replacement of *kumyshka* with vodka could be envisaged, even if the two brews are largely similar in their appearance. Because of the process of preparing *kumyshka*, the ritual dimension was what made the brew fit for communication with the divine.

As with any religious ceremony, people had to bathe in sauna before the brewing could start (Wasiljev 1902: 45). Before any action, the women brewing uttered the formula "*Oste, Inmare, Kylchine!*" ("*Oste, my God, Kylchin*") (Orlov 1999: 201). People brewed it at the end of the village or in the forest (Retish 2016: 142), or near to a spring or a river (Vladykin 1994: 112) or in winter in the home *kuala* (Pervukhin 1888a: 20)

In the Udmurt cosmology, the quality of the homebrew was believed to depend on the participation of some entities from the world beyond. In the case of an unsuccessful

ful *kumyshka* batch, the makers addressed not only the gods, but also the ancestors and expressed loudly their wishes (Bogayevskiy 1896: 43, 47; Nalimov 2010: 388; Anisimov 2019: 206). Another character that *kumyshka* makers address is Nyulesmurt, the forest spirit (Khristol'yubova 2006: 44). According to Udmurt researcher Tat'yana Vladykina (1992: 161), when the brewing of *kumyshka* failed, "the elder prepared an omelette, added a bit of canvas and birch bark into the bowl of *kumyshka*, and put it out on the fence as an offering to Nyulesmurt". Wasiljev (1902: 76) gives a report of a woman who offered bread to the river in order to have good *kumyshka* under the protection of the water spirit. Usually each maker had a whole set of magic devices to ensure success (Orlov 1999: 202). They danced and sang to make it joyful, beat the vat or waited for the tempest to make it strong (Khristol'yubova 2006: 44), and shouted to improve its quality (Mikheyev 1926: 41–48). In addition, the Udmurt often gave a particular batch of *kumyshka* the name of a person. If the *kumyshka* turned out to be a success, the name remained and the namesake would be the first to taste the new brew (Wasiljev 1902: 45).

There were also some taboos in the making of *kumyshka*. Nobody was supposed to enter the *kuala* where it was prepared, or to leave it (as during other crucial rituals like the election of new sacrificial priests, see Orlov 1999: 201). Significantly, the presence of men was also a taboo (Smirnov 1890: 115; Vladykin 1994: 112).

Let us discuss various aspects of the ritual uses of *kumyshka* as holding, pouring and drinking it, as well as funeral and commemorative rites.

#### HOLDING THE KUMYSHKA

Holding *kumyshka* is the first way it is used: it is held by *vös'as'* while he is praying. Although we have not found any comments on this practice in the literature, we may conclude that holding *kumyshka*, presenting it to the gods, is already an offering. Actually, Udmurt priests, even today, do not pray without having something in their hands. Often, in the descriptions of rituals, we are told that somebody – usually a woman – gives the priest *kumyshka* and he holds it while he is praying. The oldest such report is from a ceremony held in June 1836 in a sacred grove (Emel'yanov 1921: 109); other examples of priests holding *kumyshka* are to be found in other contemporary reports (Vereshchagin 1886: 61; Blinov 1898: 28, 32, 36; Emel'yanov 1921: 63, 109, 117; Wasiljev 1902: 53). In some cases, somebody else, often a woman, holds the *kumyshka* while the priest is praying (Wasiljev 1902: 59, 65).

#### POURING THE KUMYSHKA

Pouring is the most frequent of all uses. The most frequent case is some drops of *kumyshka* being poured into the fire as a libation. Fires are present at all sacrifices or offerings. Actually, *kumyshka* is only one of the offerings to be thrown into the fire; the same thing, depending on the ritual, happens to soup, bread, and blood. We have found no less than 25 descriptions of rituals where *kumyshka* is thrown into the fire.<sup>14</sup> But depending on the aim of the ritual, *kumyshka* may also be thrown directly on the earth (Pervukhin 1888a: 51; Blinov 1898: 31; Nalimov 2010: 315) and sometimes even in

one or more pits (Smirnov 1890: 230) in the field, with the aim of increasing fertility or soliciting protection against disease (Wasiljev 1902: 37). Closer to the house in the courtyard, ceremonies are performed for a new-born child (ibid.: 81). Another ceremony was performed in a barn for one of the deities, called Obin' Murt, in which a hole was dug in the place where the oven was situated when one had to dry grain (Smirnov 1890: 230). Other situations in which *kumyshka* was poured were the *iö kelyan* ritual, a farewell to the ice organised when the ice melted (Holmberg 1913: 84), and when balls of yarn were washed in the river (Pervukhin 1888a: 111; Khristolyubova 2006: 36). Another interesting case of the pouring of *kumyshka* is when the priest pours it into small boxes, which he then leaves in the forest for Nyulesmurt, the spirit of the forest; or for Lud<sup>15</sup> (Vereshchagin 1886: 52; Emel'yanov 1921: 78).

#### DRINKING THE KUMYSHKA

As mentioned above, one of the ways of using *kumyshka* during rituals was to drink it, either moderately or not. However, in everyday life getting drunk was considered immoral (see also Kralina 1960: 36). Pavel Orlov (2004: 99) comments that "if in a ritual context the drinking of moonshine, often beyond measure, was allowed and even was considered compulsory, in ordinary days, on the contrary, being drunk was condemned by public opinion". However, Udmurt scholar Nadezhda Shutova (2001: 85) makes a slightly different assessment: "When at ceremonies people drank, nobody got completely drunk, and the sacrificial priest did not drink at all". We agree with Shutova, by clarifying that actually, ritual drinking was usually quite moderate, but rituals were often followed by visiting and partying, in which there were no limits to the flow of *kumyshka*. The two actions were distinct, but the border between the two could be blurred. During the ritual, there could be a distribution of tasks: the *töro* drank, but the *vös'as'* did not (Blinov 1898: 29, 35).

There are two different phases in the process of using *kumyshka*. In the first, someone (here the priest) is offered *kumyshka* (Wasiljev 1902: 53, 99; Emel'yanov 1921: 117). We have identified more than ten examples of rituals in which the priest's first act after praying is to drink *kumyshka* (Gavrilov 1880: 159; Vereshchagin 1886: 49, 52; Blinov 1898: 8; 35; 28, 29; Wasiljev 1902: 38, 81, 85; Krasnopërov 2011: 288). In most cases, the *vös'as'* drank from a wooden bowl or a wooden shot measure (*charka*), but he could also, in some particular cases, drink from a ritual wooden box (Vereshchagin 1886: 49). But in some other rituals, the priest not only drinks, but also serves *kumyshka* to other people, or even to all the participants in the ritual. When the priest is also the head of a household, he may offer *kumyshka* to his entire family (Wasiljev 1902: 65, 66). In most rituals, the women offer *kumyshka* to all the participants, sometimes during the ceremony, but always after (Vereshchagin 1886: 49; 1889: 93; 1896: 95; Elabuzhskiy 1895: 629; Blinov 1898: 97; Anan'in 1901: 1111; Wasiljev 1902: 94, 95, 55, 86–97, 35; Emel'yanov 1921: 91, 110; Vladykin 1994: 184; Vladykina 1998: 317; Khristolyubova 2006: 40; Nalimov 2010: 271).

There are numerous other ways of drinking *kumyshka*. Let us name a few of these to give an idea of the whole range of possibilities. For example, in the rituals known as *chokmar*, the young village boys visit each household, and people are expected to serve

them *kumyshka* (Vereshchagin 1886: 62). At *vöi kelyan* (Candlemas), there is an obligation to break a *kumyshka* bottle. Perhaps the strangest of all is giving *kumyshka* to a horse which is brought into the house at *gery potton* (Vladykin 1994: 186).

#### FUNERAL AND COMMEMORATIVE RITES

*Kumyshka* is irreplaceable during funeral and commemorative rites. There are different rules related to usage at the time of death and immediately after someone has died, and during the funeral rites, where it was poured over the dead person in order to ease his or her passing to the other world (Koshurnikov 1880: 23; Wasiljev 1902: 105; Shutova 2001: 121), or on the threshold of the dead person's house (Smirnov 1890: 184; Shklyayev 1989: 35; Shutova 2001: 121). The Udmurt used to put various items in the grave that the deceased could need so that he or she would not be tempted to come back (Farmakovskiy 1879: 528; Kreknin 1899: 543; Luppov 1899: 27; Anan'in 1901: 1107; Emel'yanov 1921: 8; Shutova 2001: 122). In some places, the living poured *kumyshka* over the grave (Shutova 2001: 128; Vinogradov 2010: 32). Directly after a death, people enacted a practice which is central in all commemoration rituals, called *kuyas'kon* (Luppov 1899: 27; Shutova 2001: 121): those who are commemorating the dead person 'feed' the corpse by putting bits of food and some drops of drink in a bowl. As we see, the sources show the huge variation in the uses of *kumyshka* in ritual settings among Udmurt<sup>16</sup> in the past.

#### KUMYSHKA IN UDMURT RELIGIOUS PRACTICE TODAY

What we have presented so far is what we discovered in the written sources about *kumyshka* from the last third of the 19th century up to the 1920s. We have found very little relevant literature on these topics from the Soviet era. A good example of the new attitude is Soviet ethnographer Nadezhda Grinkova's (1940: 108) remark that in the pre-Soviet research on the Udmurt, such as Ivan Smirnov's book (1890), only *kumyshka* making had received extensive attention in the discussion of home crafts. Other Soviet authors insisted, very much in the spirit of the 19th century, that the brew was nefarious, although using differently motivated arguments, such as linking the use of *kumyshka* to anti-revolutionary activities (Obzor 1925: 420–421; Emel'yanov 1957: 73). However, the use of *kumyshka* in rituals did not disappear immediately, it was noted in 1924 (Luppov 1927: 13).

Indeed, the disappearance of many public rituals and their moving to the private sphere is mainly due to the interference of outsiders' ideologies. The most significant changes had begun with the spread of Russian Orthodoxy in Udmurtia. Because of thorough Christianisation, from the 18th century onwards most Udmurt were baptised. If we add to this influence the disrupting effect of Soviet antireligious policy, which touched all kinds of religious practice, we may understand that most public rituals have indeed disappeared and with them the spiritual practice of drinking *kumyshka*. Thus, the most common use of *kumyshka* today seems to be related to receiving guests rather than to the religious sphere. But if we delve more deeply into Udmurt culture, we understand that receiving guests it is not so profane an action as we could suppose

from an outsiders' point of view. Actually, probably not only for outsiders: the feeling of sacredness or at least an awareness of it has probably diminished also among the Udmurt, due to the secularist ideology that permeated Soviet life. However, there are some domains where the ritual dimension of *kumyshka* is yet very much alive, for example its use as part of the commemorative practice of honouring the dead.

The presence of *kumyshka* in funeral and commemorative rituals is well documented as we both saw in the past in all regions inhabited by the Udmurt (on Eastern Udmurt in the past, see Sadikov 2019: 151, 222). Udmurt scholars Tat'yana Russkikh and Nikolay Anisimov discuss today's situation in several of their works (Anisimov 2017; 2018; 2019; Russkikh 2019: 230–231). As far as the authors of this paper are concerned, we have discovered this dimension thanks to close contact with young Udmurts living in Estonia, which has helped us to identify these discreet practices later in the field, especially among Southern and Eastern Udmurt. Many of these practices may be interpreted through the prism of relations with the dead. As the dead ancestors continue to be an active presence in people's everyday lives, they are addressed for luck and protection on countless occasions. When Eva happened to knock something down from a table, this was interpreted as a message from the otherworld that the ancestors want to drink too. The automatic reaction of our younger Udmurt friends was to immediately put out a shot of *kumyshka* (actually any other alcohol may also be used), with some food in front. At the end of the gathering, the shot goes around anti-clockwise and all drink some of it. This was the experience, which allowed us to recognise this practice in the field.

The same practice is present in general commemorations, or when there had been a death in the house, one year after the death. It is not a spectacular practice and it is not accompanied by public verbal formulas, it is just there, discreetly. Shot glasses are small objects and without personal experience, we would not have noticed them among other utensils on the kitchen table. Some months after the death of Eva's old friend Olga, Olga's daughter-in-law was cooking something fine, and it was natural to invite the deceased to partake in it (FM: Karamas-Pel'ga, Kiyasovo district, 2019). The same happened at a young Udmurt's birthday, in Estonia, when a shot was discreetly put out for the ancestors. On Easter Day (*Bydzh'ynnal*) a shot also had to be positioned at the end of the table (FM: Tartu 2020). So, this is very much a living tradition in which *kumyshka* has a key role.

While we reserve the analysis of today's use of *kumyshka* for another article ad hoc, we must acknowledge that there are still some remains of traditional Udmurt religion in some places where Christianity has not penetrated that much. Let us have a look at some of these villages (Kuzebayevo and Varkled Böd'ya) and wider areas (Eastern Udmurtia), and observe how *kumyshka* is used in these contexts.

### *Kuzebayevo*

Some villages have managed to avoid Christianisation. In Udmurtia, one village has resisted and kept its commitment to the Udmurt ways. This is Kuzebayevo in the Alnashi district, where Udmurt religious practices survived throughout the Soviet period and are still vibrant today (Atamanov 2014: 29).<sup>17</sup> The village is divided into kin groups connected with different sacred places, but everyone may attend all the ceremonies. There

are the ceremonies at the great *kuala* (*Bydzh'ym kuala*), those at the *lud* (or *keremet*) sacred place, and some, every three years, at the *bulda* sacred place.<sup>18</sup>

At the great *kuala* ceremony, each attending family brings offerings in the form of bread and *kumyshka*, leaving them on a table near the *kuala* to be sanctified by the sacrificial priests. When Eva attended the event in 2011, about 15 families had brought a sacrificial bird, such as a duck or goose. They set a fire and put a cauldron on it. Those who had no sacrificial animal were invited to join with some other family. The living birds were sanctified by the priests in the *kuala* and then the male head of the family slaughtered them; the women prepared the birds and put them into the cauldron. Later, when the meat was cooked, the women prepared a porridge that was served to two or three families. Then *kumyshka* was served, offered, from two bottles belonging to the two families with whom Eva was eating. Later, during the night, the men attended the *lud* ceremony, where no alcohol whatsoever was offered.<sup>19</sup> After the first ceremony, with our Udmurt hosts, we went to other families around the village and celebrated the event with abundant *kumyshka*.

#### *Varkled Böd'ya*

In 2017, during the week before Orthodox Easter, Eva had the privilege of attending and documenting, with her Udmurt colleague Nikolay Anisimov, four rituals in the Udmurt village of Varkled Böd'ya (in Agryz district, Tatarstan), which, in spite of the border between administrative units, is situated around 20 kilometres from Kuzebayevo. They documented four rituals through observation, photo and video (Anisimov and Toulouze 2018; Toulouze and Anisimov 2018; 2020). In three of them, *kumyshka* was present.

The first of these rituals, *Eru karon*, the initiation ritual for boys aged 16 and 17, took place on the Thursday before Easter. All the boys of the right age participate, also young relatives living in town come particularly for this ritual. The boys do not drink *kumyshka* themselves, but at the end of the ritual, they offer it to the sacrificial priests and to the male part of the village population (women are not allowed to attend the ritual). In the evening, there is a smaller ritual to chase away evil spirits from all households, although no *kumyshka* was part of this.

Sunday of the same week is traditionally the day on which the year started for the Udmurt. This day is called *Bydzh'yymal*, 'the Great Day', and it coincides with Orthodox Easter. Today, there are two rituals on that day. For practical reasons (mainly because of complaints by schoolteachers), the initiation of girls was moved to Sunday, merging with the kin ritual called *vös' nerge*. In the initiation ritual,<sup>20</sup> the girls bring along their moonshine – made by their mothers – and use it during and at the end of the ritual. Before the prayer by the sacrificial priests, each girl pours some of her homebrew into a common bowl. The three priests leading the ritual each hold one bowl: one with the ritual porridge, the second with money offerings, the third with the *kumyshka* from all the initiated. After the prayer, the priest who holds the alcohol offers it to all the girls, who taste it. Then, when the attendants, both men and women, eat the porridge, the girls go around and offer the alcohol, firstly to their kin.

The last ritual, the above-mentioned *vös' nerge*, which starts before the final stage of the initiation, is interrupted to allow the participants to join the girls for the end of the

ritual, and continues afterwards. *Vös' nerge* consists in a series of visits to all the members of close kin groups, called *bölyak*, so that the same ritual is performed in each house (see Toulouze and Anisimov 2020). The head of the household goes into the yard with porridge prepared by his wife, prays, and comes back. All the kin stand up to receive him, he tastes the porridge, followed by his wife and his children. Then they eat ritual and other food and sing the ritual song of their *bölyak*. The housewife offers the participants moonshine; those who are not supposed to drink moonshine are offered coloured eggs. Actually, one of the characteristics of *vös' nerge* is that each *bölyak* has rituals of its own. In another *bölyak*, *kumyshka* was also served to the head of the household, then to the male participants and then to the women. Because Eva and Nikolay were guests and no part of the kin group, they were served last – Nikolay first, Eva after him (see also Anisimov 2019: 212).

#### *Udmurts in Bashkortostan*

The authors have both done fieldwork among the Bashkortostan Udmurt, and attended more than 20 village ceremonies and ceremonies gathering several villages in different districts. *Kumyshka* exists in this region, and women brew it as anywhere else in the Udmurt areas. Nonetheless, nowhere here is *kumyshka* part of the ritual life. This must be due to the Muslim environment they have lived in for the last couple of centuries. We saw homebrewed alcohol only twice during the day of sacrificial ceremonies – however, not during any of the ceremonies but directly afterwards. In Urazgil'dy (the Tatyshly district), in June 2014, some women went out of the enclosed sacred place after the end of the village ceremony, they sat on the grass and started to sing. One of them took out a bottle of her homebrew and began offering it to the others. Then she entered with her bottle into the sacred space, and offered *kumyshka* to the priest and his helpers. The men chased her from the fenced space and criticised her for what she did. The second time was in Starokalmiyarovo (Tatyshly district), in 2018 when Eva attended the village ceremony alone. She had been befriended by one village family. The lady of that family, after the ceremony, asked the priests whether it was all right if she offered her *kumyshka*. The priest agreed, but showed them the place where they could do this. The fenced space encompassed two areas, one for ritual actions and one for the onlookers, and only in the latter was it allowed.

However, in addition to big village rituals there are a multitude of smaller scale rituals which are performed either depending on the ritual calendar or for family events. In these cases, while the main ritual food is porridge, *kumyshka* is always present and is offered around, as is the case in other hosting ceremonies.

#### CONCLUSION

As we have seen, there have been huge changes in the life of the Udmurt in the last centuries, which are very well illustrated by the fate of *kumyshka*. The most intrusive dimension of these changes is what happened in the religious life of Udmurt: they were compelled to follow the religions and ideologies imposed by the state and its church.

This was done first through incentives, as from the 16th to the 18th century when people were encouraged to embrace Christianity with measures that facilitated their lives (tax relief, amnesty, etc.). Later, and more effectively, through direct or indirect violence (Luppov 1899). Over time however this new, exogenous religion, found its roots in the Udmurt context and was absorbed by most of the Udmurt. It has supplanted much of the old animist ritual sphere and has influenced the ontological sensibilities that have otherwise survived the external influences. However, as we have shown, there are some areas (in Bashkortostan) and villages (Kuzebayevo and Varkled Böd'ya) where animist practices are better preserved, although they have gone through significant changes as well (see Toulouze et al. 2018a; 2018b; Toulouze and Anisimov 2020; Toulouze and Vallikivi 2021).

There are no more big collective ceremonies with *kumyshka* flowing (and this has never been the case in areas with a Muslim majority). This is a superficial layer. We use the term superficial in a very concrete sense to mean the first layer, which is there for all to see. It is real, just as real as some continuity elements that may be identified in a deeper layer. For example, while the religious dimension of *kumyshka* is not explicit today, something of it remains in the wider usage of *kumyshka* as a welcoming drink for guests. Or take singing: it is not fortuitous that Udmurts classify welcoming songs as ritual songs. They are performed while serving *kumyshka*, and while we may be less sensitive to the sacred aspect of honouring our guests, this dimension, for the Udmurt, is not fully lost. Other changes have occurred as well, for example the permanent trend towards urbanisation which draws the Udmurt closer and closer to the Russian world and which is stronger among the younger people. It is real, and the weight of Russian values becomes heavier and heavier, in fashion, ways of being, language: everything is permeated by new realities that are alien, but at the same time attractive. Nevertheless, here and there the deeper layers retain something of the more tacit forms of Udmurt ontology, which has not been entirely annihilated but has become more hybrid than ever in the recent past. We do not see these layers as contradictory, but rather as organic and complementary. From this point of view, *kumyshka* is a good example of a substance that retains links with the invisible spirit world.

#### NOTES

1 Both authors have been visiting Udmurt villages since 1994, when we were in Udmurtia together. Since 2014, we have been doing fieldwork together among the Udmurt in Bashkortostan. Eva has been investigating Udmurt culture and has regularly spent time in Udmurt communities gathering an abundant corpus of data.

2 This brew may have different strengths depending on the maker and the region: as a rule, it is stronger in the North of the Udmurt area and weaker, around 20°, in the South.

3 Until the 1920s referred to as Votyaks.

4 This is not specific to the Udmurt as the topic of alcohol is often discussed when indigenous populations are touched upon (see for example Leete 2019).

5 Keremet, also known under the name Lud, is a punishing deity (*keremet* also marks a ritual, see Lintrop 2003: 93–94; Siikala and Ulyashev 2011: 295–297).

6 In the 18th and 19th century, law makers paid significant attention to forbidding or restricting the practice of brewing non-monopoly alcohol (Kappeler 1982: 260, 381–382; Taagepera 1999: 264, 267–268; Pislegin 2016: 91). For instance, in 1803, Alexander I forbade the sale of non-monopoly alcohol but allowed production among the Udmurt for domestic uses (Luppov 1911b: 1–2),

later laws (e.g. in 1830) forbade the brewing of alcohol stronger than vodka (Kulikov 2004: 192; Retish 2016: 145). But in between and later, other laws, created out of fear of competition with the state monopoly on vodka, totally prohibited brewing (1811, 1818 and finally 1890), mainly for fiscal reasons (Luppov 1905: 515). Udmurts initially ignored the prohibition and continued brewing *kumyshka* by going to remote places, far from the eyes of state officials, “in forests and gullies” (Luppov 1899: 31; see also Koshurnikov 1880: 20; Sprenzhin 1900: 818). The Church, for reasons of its own, whole-heartedly supported these measures and published several brochures in Udmurt against *kumyshka* (e.g. Rassylka 1905: 591). They were accompanied by the confiscation of brewing devices (Pislegin 2016: 91).

7 Unlike Retish, we focus more on the aspect which George Munro (2018: 78) refers to in his review on Retish’s very useful paper: “It would be useful to know precisely how *kumyshka* was (and is) used in religious rites”.

8 Orthodox Udmurt also drank *kumyshka* during Orthodox festivities in the early 19th century (Pislegin 2016: 92).

9 *Kua/kuala* is a cult building (for more details cf. Vladyskin 1994: 272 and following). There are two sorts of *kuala*: family (*pokchi kuala*) and clan *kuala* (*bydzh’ym kuala*). The family sanctuary was in each family’s courtyard. *Kualas* have now disappeared in most Udmurt areas.

10 Let us give an example of a prayer to rivers when the ice breaks from the 19th century were *kumyshka* is mentioned: “Oste my Inmar, Kyldys’in, Kuazh, Durga Vorshud, Mother Chupch’i [Udmurt name for Cheptsá River], Mother Pyz’ep! Without any argument and bickering, we have come with our good neighbours to your shore, with bread, beer and *kumyshka*. Oh, Mothers Chupch’i, Pyz’ep, bread-giving rivers! Give your people an easy year, good luck, well-being in all things! Oh! Mothers who never run dry, along your stream see off all the diseases!” (Pervukhin 1888c: 9–10; see also Wichmann 1893: 134; Honko, Timonen and Branch 1993: 204, 681, Taagepera 1999: 253.)

11 A ritual immediately after a cow calving where colostrum ‘cheese’ is offered.

12 For instance, in Kuzebayevo in 2011, according to our experience, there was definitely no alcohol.

13 The *tõro* was one of the most respected authorities in both the religious and secular Udmurt community. In the religious context, the *tõro* was the elder who knew the rituals and the prayers best. *Tõro* is today also a word used for the head of the Udmurt Republic.

14 These are Pervukhin 1888b: 53; Vereshchagin 1889: 94; Bogayevskiy 1896: 37; Blinov 1898: 57, 27, 28, 44, 56; Luppov 1899: 31; Anan’in 1901: 1111; Wasiljev 1902: 53, 55, 85, 86, 88, 107; Emel’yanov 1921: 109, 111, 113; Shutova 2001: 74, 75; Vinogradov 2010: 48; Krasnopërov 2011: 285, 289, 288.

15 *Lud* is an Udmurt deity, allegedly of Turkic origin, whose cult is widespread in the Volga region. His cult is situated in fenced groves (also known as *lud*) and is connected to the forest.

16 It is also used in birth rites in the mid-19th century (Grishkina 2010: 38).

17 That year Eva attended the ceremonies in Kuzebayevo on June 13 and 14, along with Estonian Marti Mätas and Udmurt Vasili Khokhryakov. The *lud* or *keremet* ceremony was not open to females, but her companions were invited and Marti was allowed to film (Toulouze 2011). Only a few individuals have adopted Christianity there (FM: 2015).

18 This is dedicated to the deity *Bulda* where larger rituals are organised every three years (Siikala and Ulyashev 2011: 295).

19 This was in 2011. Finnish folklorist Anna-Leena Siikala, who attended this ritual 20 years earlier in 1991, mentions that some men went further to smoke and drink “heating *kumyshka*”. But she adds: “*Keremet* does not tolerate impurity or bad manners in his grove” (Siikala and Ulyashev 2011: 292). Actually, a similar scene is described by Vereshchagin (1889: 98).

20 The initiation ritual has today merged with *akashka*, the plough feast.

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FM = Fieldwork materials. The materials are in the personal archives of the authors.

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