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**Yafaeva G. F.,**

Teaching assistant of the Department of History, State History and Law

 Bashkir State University branch in Neftekamsk

Russian Federation

**FUNERAL-BURIAL RITES OF THE MARI OF THE NORTH-WEST OF THE BASHKORTOSTAN REPUBLIC**

**Summary.** This article analyzes the funeral-burial rites of the Mari from the Bashkortostan Republic. It reveals traditional pagan beliefs of the people, including the idea of the afterworld and the existence of a soul after death. There are purifying and protective rituals, cult of the ancestors and traces of the cult of fire found in the context of the funeral rite.

**Key words:** funeral-burial rite, the Mari, paganism, ritual, the cult of ancestors.

The Mari are the Finno-Ugric ethnic group in Russia, which ethnographers traditionally divide on three local groups: the Mountain Mari, that reside on the right and partly on the left bank of the Volga; the Meadow Mari, that reside in-between rivers Volga and Vyatka, and the Eastern Mari, that today settle mostly in Bashkortostan. The Eastern Mari ethnic group was formed as a result of the Meadow Mari’s migration to the Kama region and the Cisural region (today’s territory of Bashkortostan, Tatarstan, Udmurtia, the Perm and the Sverdlovsk Regions) from the second half of XVI to the middle of the XVIII centuries. The migration was caused by colonization of the eastern regions of the Russian Empire and was a form of Mari’s protest to oppressions. As a result of isolation from the maternal ethnicity and from the contacts with the local population the Mari retained most ancient ethnical traits in culture and life, traditional pagan beliefs, but at the same time they’ve suffered significant influence of the culture of neighboring peoples including the Bashkirs and the Tatars. (9, 15). The analysis of the funeral rite as a specific element of the culture of Mari in Bashkortostan Republic gives us a great understanding of the preservation level of their traditional culture and ancient ideas about the afterworld, world of spirits and deities, and also about the layering of a different culture.

According to the Mari’s traditional beliefs, death came as a result of human’s soul departure. The Mari pictured the soul as a vapor or a spirit leaving the body with its last breath, and also as a butterfly. If a butterfly flew into the house, it was considered as a visit by the dead relatives. An example of a memorial song:

Tyiynat-lai shushkymet shuylda gyn,

Port vokteke tolylden shushkaltal.

Memnamat-lai uzhmet shuylda gyn,

Sar lepene liiyn tolyldal.

And its translation:

If you will ever wish to whistle,

Whistle near my house by the holy thistle.

If you will ever want to see us,

Come, as a white butterfly and buss (10, 283).

Foreseeing the death of a person, he was moved from the feather mattress and pillow to the ones made of straw. It was thought that lying on the straw helped the soul easier leave the body. Moreover, the one deceased on a feather mattress supposedly was made count the feathers in the afterlife. After the death coming, all the gates, doors and windows in the house were opened so that the souls of deceased relatives could enter and take the soul of the departed (PMA 2: Alekseeva).

The idea of “soul” has been denoted by the Mari as “yort” and “chon”. Yort was given to all tangible objects: trees, animals, humans, buildings, bread, instruments, etc. Yort of non-living things left them in case of their integrity’s damage (if a thing has been broken or a tree has been cut). A man lost his yort as a result of a fright or due to the substitution of the soul by evil spirits or a warlock. An absence of the yort-soul led to an illness of a person or, in case of a long absence, to a death. After death the yort-soul moved to the afterworld, but if a person died ahead of time, his yort stays on earth until the time allotted to it has passed. Therefore, under the idea of yort, the Mari understood a bodiless double or a shadow of all the living and non-living things (8, 155-157; 12, 130-131).

The idea of chon-soul was somewhat different from the yort: “poro chonan eng” said about a person with a good soul, “chonem korshta” meant “soul-heart hurts”, “chondymo chonanym shotara” is a riddle: “the alive one cries because of the dead one”. Chon-soul could have only the living creatures. It left a person during the sleep and with its last breath. Therefore, the idea of chon was close to such ideas like “life” and “heart” (8, 155-157).

Right after the death of a person, a bowl with water and a towel was put next to it. According to one version, a soul of the deceased was supposed to cleanse itself in the bowl; another is that the bowl was used by the spirit of death to clean its bloody knife and then wipe it with a towel.

In the past the Mari believed, that death was a result of Azyren’s work. Azyren was an angel of death and his name is thought to trace its roots to a name of a Muslim angel of death named Azrael (5, 278). He appeared as a powerful man with a knife, which he used to cut a person’s throat, and took his blood. Right after that or within some time (a month, a year) a person died (1, 115-116).

For two hours after death, a person was not to be disturbed or moved, because during that time the soul left the body. After that ablution could be performed. While still alive, elderly people were preparing burial clothes, towels, appointed a well-known person but not a relative to perform the ablution. In the summer, the ablution took place in a dressing room of a bathhouse or in a yard under a sunshade and in the winter time – inside of a bathhouse. As a rule, a deceased woman was washed by women and a deceased man – by men. Warm water and a cloth, made of the deceased’s clothes or wool of a white lamb, were used to perform the ablution. Close relatives were not allowed to wash the deceased because it was thought, that the departed would feel not clean enough (ogesh shu). The water for the ablution has been brought in three turns: three persons were supposed to wash the deceased one (some consider that this number should be even), clean clothes were also brought in three terms\* (PMA 1: Imaeva).

\*The sacredness of the action is felt through the symbolism of the number “three”.

The deceased person was dressed in clean, but not new clothes. If the clothes were new, they had to be washed. Otherwise, the deceased did not get the clothes (ogesh shu) and felt naked. Earlier the wedding attire was used as the burial clothes. A head-dress, a shirt, a belt, a gabardine, pants and shoes were required elements of the burial clothes. Sign of the ancient ideas of the afterworld as of cold and northern region were woolen socks and mittens that have been put on the deceased one. After the procedure of dressing, the deceased one was laid inside the house on boards of lime bast with his feet facing the exit and left there until the day of funeral.

As a rule, the Mari bury the deceased on the next day after death, but there can be delays because of the arrival of distant relatives. In the morning of the burial day a few people go to dig the grave. The coffin, which was called “house” of the departed, is made prior to or on the day of the funeral. At the level of head, on the right side a small window is made. A coin of white metal (before it was made of silver) was put in the window (PMA 1: Imaeva). There is an idea that the coin is a symbol of sun, which is absent in the afterworld. Sawdust from the coffin lay on its bottom. On top of it a white sheet and a specially made pillow filled with birch leaves are laid. Feathers cannot be used to make the pillow, because the deceased one might have to count them all in the afterlife (PMA 2: Alekseeva).

The Mari believed, that life on earth continues in the afterlife, that is why the deceased was provided everything necessary. The deceased was dressed in a complete outfit, also a change of clothes and garments, a comb, a mirror, a towel; three crepes (to treat the other deceased) and a bag with money were laid inside the coffin (for wealth). The men were supplied with a pipe and cigarettes and women – unfinished needlework, etc. If the departed is not supplied with everything he needs, he will keep coming back to get what he needs, disturbing alive relatives. Moreover, to ward off the dogs and evil spirits in the afterlife a branch of briar and two branches of rowan were laid inside the coffin. The deceased is covered with a white sheet; his face is covered with three handkerchiefs. Three colored ribbons or threads are laid on top of the deceased. It is thought that the deceased is swinging on these ribbons like on a swing until the 40th day and awaiting the arrival of guests. Long ribbons cannot be used because the deceased’s legs will tangle (PMA 1, 2: Alekseeva, Baitulina, Imaeva). Besides, there is an opinion that the deceased will walk on these threads over the pot with sulfur (8, 164) or on these threads as if on the swing he will get down to the afterworld (12, 151). Therefore, the threads or ribbons are probably used in the burial ceremony as means of traveling on the other side.

In the afternoon the coffin with the deceased is taken outside the house by four or six people (number of people is supposed be even). With words “Don’t take your happiness with you, leave it to us!” he is slightly swung three times in the doorway, not touching the corners.

After the coffin has been taken outside the gates, a chicken or a rooster (it depends on the gender of the deceased). Blood is smeared on a forehead or on lips (PMA 1, 2: Baitulina, Vasinkina). It was done while saying the following words: “Redeem your blood from the death” (11, 71). Blood in this case acts as a reservoir for vitality. Without it a person cannot exist even in the afterlife. Eating such bird is forbidden, however, some Mari cook it on the third day after funeral.

The coffin with the deceased was taken to a cemetery on a cart or a sled. Until the middle of the XX century, the coffin was placed on a sled at any time of the year, which once again confirms the past ideas of the Mari about the world of dead as of a cold and snowy place , located somewhere in the north [12, 158]. This fact is also confirmed by the data of archeology. Based on the data from the ancient Mari graves of XI-XVIII centuries, an archaeologist A. Mikheev, notes that in the XI century dominated the northern orientation of the head of the deceased. Western orientation of the head became predominant after the XVI century among the Mountain Mari, probably due to contacts with the Russian population [4, 103-104].

While the funeral procession is moving to the cemetery, three hot stones from the oven are laid on the floor inside the house and swept towards the exit with a birch broom. On the spot where stood the coffin, a nail is hammered into the floor (so that the coffin was not dreamt of). Defensive magic tricks can clearly be seen – cleansing space with fire (hot rocks) and iron (a nail) [ACA 1.2: Baitulina , Vasinkina ].

Before burial, coins were thrown in the grave to buy back the land from the land owner. Then the face of the dead is opened up three times and he is asked to look at the world for the last time, to leave quiet with no offense, etc. the face is covered again and the coffin is nailed up and lowered into the grave.

All those present at the cemetery go around the grave in the direction of the sun three times and each throws a handful of earth on the coffin. After that, the coffin is embedded, and on the grave a pole is mounted, or birch trees are planted at the foot and at the bed head. On the tree (on the pole) a towel is hanged. For married people a towel, given for their wedding, was used (so that even after death, they will be together), for all the others (unmarried women, bachelors, teenagers and children) it was crafted specially for the funeral [PMA 1.2: Alekseev, Baitulina, Imaeva]. Researchers note that the pole on the grave symbolizes the "earthly prototype of the heavenly pillar"; the towel on the pole represents the connection of this world with the afterworld, and also is the pointer to the path to the afterworld [3, 60, 12, 163]. It is curious to see the image of the cuckoo on the grave pole, where it is likely to be a mediator between the world of the living and the world of the dead. In addition, researcher Yu. A. Kaliev believes that the location of the bird at the top of the pole – of the “heavenly pillar” characterizes it as one of the components of the astral mythological picture [3, 60].

Commemoration took place on the grave right after the burial. A small table is put at the head of the grave, where three candles were mounted. One was for Kiyamata torya, one for Kiyamata saus and one for the dead, and treats for them. Those who are present address to the ruler of the underworld: "Receive him well; so that he does not fall ill, do not let him near us, we will come ourselves." After that, once again people go around the grave three times and sweep it with a broom three times with words: “Let your house be clean!” Leaving the cemetery, it’s common not to look back, as it is believed that you will soon be back there.

Upon the arrival back home, all those who participated in the burial, washed their hands before entering the house, it was followed by a washing in bath-house. In some cases there is a purified by fire - warming their hands in the oven. After the purification by water and fire a memorial meal was arranged, the mandatory courses of it were crepes and porridge. In the XIX century, ritual drinks at the funeral were the hopped beer (pura) and honey alcoholic beverages (puro , shorva), which in the XX century was replaced by vodka. All participants of the funeral were given a thank you gift (soap, towels, handkerchiefs, etc) for helping. [CSA 1.2: Alekseev, Imaeva ].

Thus, in the funeral-burial rites can be traced the traditional pagan beliefs of the Mari Republic of Bashkortostan. An important place among these beliefs held the ideas about the afterlife and the existence of the souls of the dead after death. According to the beliefs of the Mari, Kiyamat-Tora was in charge of the afterworld. In the house and at the cemetery to honor the ruler and his assistant the candles are lit with following words: Kiyamat tora, Kiyamat saus and the name of the deceased. [PMA 1: Imaeva]. The soul of the deceased person was attributed with almost all properties of a living person. The Mari believed that the soul is invisibly present among relatives. During the funeral and memorial services he was invited to the table or to visit. It was believed that a person in the afterworld is expected to have the same life as in this world, and that is why the relatives supplied the deceased with a house, a land property and a farm. The coffin in the presence of the dead was always called “home”. A piece of land (the grave) "was bought out" with coins from the lord of the underworld. The deceased was supplied with everything necessary: an extra set of clothes, underwear, a comb, a mirror, food, money, etc.

The cult of ancestors is found in the Mari’s funeral rite through respect for the dead, referring to him with requests for health, well-being, happiness. It was also found in the family commemorations, which Mari held several times a year. Veneration of the fire and its mediating role between the world of the living and the world of the dead can be found in the tradition of lighting candles at home or at the cemetery, making a fire near the grave, also in the tradition of warming hands in the oven after the funeral, etc.

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**Яфаева Г.М. Поховальна обрядовість марійців північного-заходу Республіки Башкортостан. – Стаття.**

**Анотація.** У статті аналізується поховальна обрядовість марійців Республіки Башкортостан. Виявляються традиційні язичницькі вірування народу, в тому числі уявлення про загробний світ і існування душі після смерті. У контексті поховального обряду простежуються очищувальні і запобіжні ритуали, культ предків, сліди культу вогню.
**Ключові слова:** поховальний обряд, марійці, язичництво, ритуал, культ предків.

**Аннотация.** В статье анализируется похоронно-погребальная обрядность марийцев Республики Башкортостан. Выявляются традиционные языческие верования народа, в том числе представления о загробном мире и существовании души после смерти. В контексте похоронного обряда прослеживаются очищающие и предохранительные ритуалы, культ предков, следы культа огня.

**Ключевые слова:** похоронно-погребальный обряд, марийцы, язычество, ритуал, культ предков.