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Preservation of Traditions and Ethnic Identity. An Udmurt Case

The present paper is focusing on the tradition preserving activities in the Udmurt villages especially in a certain village of Zagljud-Kaksya which can be found in Vavozh district, in Central-Udmurtia. The material of the paper is based on the experience of my field work, what I carried out in Central-Udmurtia (2004, 2009 and 2011).

Usually, the preservation of the traditions manifest itself in founding groups, collecting dresses, dance, music, establishing local museums or collections, organizing events where the traditional culture can be represented. After the Perestroyka, it got new inspiration with the opening world falling on the Udmurt villages and brought with itself the ethnic revival and the new claim to the cultivation of the past and searching for roots and identities.

The tradition preserving activities in the previous years are closely connected with folklore festivals. The ensemble Bölyak (the name of the group means 'kinship') of Zaglyud-Kaksya village, was established under the effect of a folklore festival, in 2004. The inspirative one was the Vorshud festival held in 2004, and on the same festival I got in touch with the founders of the group, when their group was not even recognized. None of their members are professional musicians or artists. They started to collect songs, dances and clothes from the elderly people of the village and in 2004 they established their ensemble with some other village women. Nadezhda S. Smirnova, one of the founders, said about the beginnings: *"We went to aunts, took notices and we were talking with them, how it was before. But, at the first time, the aunts said „What is it for? This was a long time ago.” They did not want to remember. First they said only – „It was difficult.” Later, they shown interest in that we want to know about their life...our life. That we want to learn songs. (...) When we*

went to them at the first, they said „Ooh, we do not know – said – no, no, no, we have forgot!”, or „I know only one strophe of it.”, „We cannot sing songs any more.”-said. When we went there at the second time, we were talking with the girls – „Let us take some araky (home made alcohol – by the author) with us!” We took araky, gave some to them, they were drinking is little by little and then all of them remembered, all of them were singing and we were recording it on dictafone or quickly were writing it with pen on a piece of paper. It is understandable, (...) they were shy without drinking araky...maybe...they really could not remember, and they were drinking a little because before, when we were singing, we were drinking as well, or at the time of some celebration ...oh, we were singing so much.”



1. The ensemble of Bölyak, Zaglyud-Kaksya, Udmurtia

At the first time, their activity was not acceptable or understandable by the village people – and sometimes even by family members - but after a time, when the group appeared on folklore festivals and in newspapers too, and news get back to the village, most of them could accept it. The Bölyak participated on many local events in the past eight years and the breakthrough was in 2005, when the ensemble could take part in a folklore festival in Estonia. Mostly after this show the group presented in Estonia – the village people felt something, which was a kind of pride. *“At the beginning they looked at us as foolish because we were walking through the village asking people if they have old dresses (...), we were bustling around, asking for them to bring us old dresses. We knew some, who had, but they did not give any. Then we sew and decorated clothes ourselves. (...) Later, after that we went to Estonia, people started bringing dresses by themselves (...) I think, at the beginning, they did not trust in this. (...) So we can show their own clothes on-stage to them to see what beautiful dresses we [she means Udmurts – by the author] have. (...) Family...my sisters and my brothers...half of them like it, they are interested in it but the other half says I am just spending time with it.”*

On festivals – local ones, where the Bölyak has performances, or others, like the “national” Gerber festival – the local community(ies) has good chances to recognize their own traditional culture as interesting, sometimes even exotic, and something which is worth to *cultivate and preserve*.

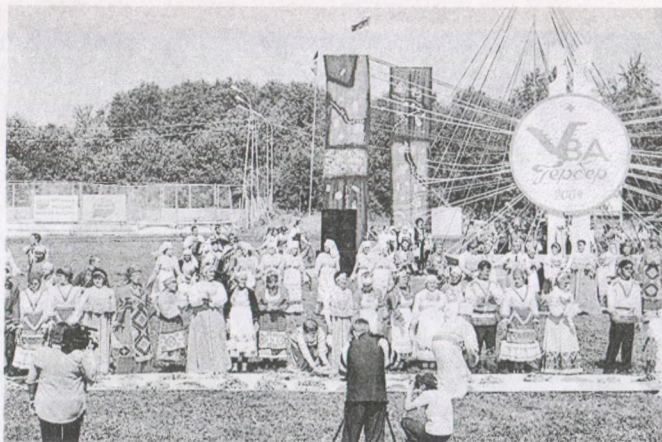
Moving on to the next item on folklore festivals where the group can show their traditions and people (locals and tourists) can meet the *traditional* culture - on stage. How can festivals present the *traditional culture*, the *authentic character* of a culture? At this point, we have to observe the *authenticity*. The goals of the ensembles and the organizations and institutes supporting them usually are described as preserving and cultivating the traditions. The members of the Bölyak also think that what they are doing is preserving traditions and showing the *authentic* local Udmurt culture.

Festivals (rituals, cuisine, dress, etc.) are usually described as „*authentic*” or „*inauthentic*” in terms of the criterion of whether they are made or enacted by local people according to customs or tradition [5: 350], but we cannot ignore the fact they - as the products of tourism -, always are created, or as Eric Hobsbawm called them *invented*. He introduced the term of *invented traditions* to the anthropological research [1: 127].

The best example for invention of traditions is the Gerber festival in Udmurtia. Originally, the *gerber* was a celebration and rite connected with agricultural works and as an animist one was forbidden or tolerated in the previous political eras, and in the '90's has been formed into national holiday. On stage, at the time of celebrations, the performances of the ensemble appear as the *representation of the past and the ethnic culture* at the same time. [3: 20] Let us to see the example of the Gerber festival held in 2004. The performance pretended on a ritual at the sacred place. Ritual elements were lifted out from the original context and were put into a totally different one, the festival stage: spreading white sheet on the ground and putting food on it, praying (reading prayers on Russian and Udmurt) as the food became blessed, and later the blessed food were sharing among people.



2. Udmurt sacrificial ritual. From: *Udmurtskaya Encyclopedia*



3. “Sacrificial” rite on Gerber Festival, 2004.

The people, folklore ensembles taking part in the performance believe they are preserving Udmurt traditions – as they are most likely creating them – tourists believe they saw something *authentic*. Thus, even though the tourists themselves think they have gained authentic experiences, however, the objects can be *in fact* false, contrived, or created. From this aspect, the *motivations*, *emotions* and *experiences* are authentic on both sides, the ensembles and visitors as well.

On the second level, these events also form the imaginations of the outsiders about the place and community mainly by their own experience and also by press and news. It can be noticed, the ensemble is an active participant of the *production of locality* and as a symbol of the locality strongly influences the peoples' own perceptions about their identity and their motions towards the place, land and landscape as well [3: 17].

Base for the production of locality is the canonization and ritualized play of certain cultural elements and phenomena mentioned *authentic* or which can be sold as *authentic*. That is why one can see mass performances on festivals, which try to behave as rites: the performance refers somehow to traditional rites but the certain rite, event, custom, etc. itself is getting less important. The Udmurt dances and music are part of the big and colorful cavalcade, which sometimes is placed to a football field instead of stage.



4. The Bölyak on the XVIII. Summer Sport Games of the Udmurt Republic, 2009, Vavozh

It is necessary to study the connection between this type of mass performances and the practice of Soviet celebrations which cannot be ignored. It would be worth to think about that festival organizing fever is not (only) about preserving of traditions but more developing the tourism and economy, too. And who is the winner of this development? The local community, the folklore ensemble or those, who invest money in developing tourism through cultural displays? The further fieldworks can answer these questions and study the relationships and balance among locals and tourists, the ensemble and the tourism developers:

Literature

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2. The Invention of Tradition, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
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4. Megalkotott hagyományok és falusi turizmus. A pusztamérgesi eset. In: Puzstai B. (ed.): Megalkotott hagyományok és falusi turizmus. Szeged, SzTE Néprajzi Tanszék, 2003. pp. 9-21.
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6. Rethinking Authenticity in Tourism Experience. In: Annals of Tourism Research. Vol. 24. No. 2. pp. 349-370. 1999. PII: S0160-7383(98)00103-0

Fieldwork

2004 – city of Uva, Uva district, Udmurtia – Vorshud festival

2009 – Zaglyud-Kaksya, Vavozh district, Udmurtia

2011 – Zaglyud-Kaksya, Vavozh district, Udmurtia