

## **SACRED TREES AND GROVES IN MARI TABOOS**

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### **Abstract**

The main aim of the article is to analyze Mari taboos related with sacred groves and trees. The authors drew a parallel between other Finno-Ugric people's taboos. The article deals with spiritual and moral values which are reflected in Mari folklore. Outlook of the Mari is reflected in their relation to the surrounding world - the earth, sky, the sun, the moon, rivers, lakes, springs, forest and its inhabitants - animals, birds, and insects. Following the rules and principles established by the ancestors the Maris believe in preserving harmony with nature, relatives. Mari folk wisdom related with trees and sacred groves was worked out over the centuries, and it appeared from the experience and observation, folded tips, suggestions and restrictions which gradually became life principles and the guidelines that the Maris should abide strictly. The most part of Mari prohibitions, bans and taboos are related with ancient pagan cult concepts. They believed that existence and prosperity depended on worshiped objects and phenomena. The main function of bans and taboos was to respect for the objects of worship. Observance of taboos was to ensure the protection of these forces, security and well-being of the generation, family and relatives, an individual. Being surrounded by nature, drawing analogies between objects and phenomena of the world, ancient people made conclusions, influenced by the rules and laws that determined the range of restrictions and prohibitions. For example, seeing the growth of trees and how trees come to life in the spring and fall into a state of sleep in autumn the Maris concluded that the trees were alive. The Maris believed that trees felt pain as people. Consequently, it was not allowed to cut trees without any special needs. Mari taboos related with sacred trees and groves are inscribed in religious, ethical, aesthetic ideas. They govern the relationship between man and nature, define the hierarchy of relations between the members of the ethnic community and family, have a great educational effect, and define a man's place in the world.

**Keywords:** the Maris, sacred groves, sacred trees, taboos, bans, folklore wisdom

### **1 INTRODUCTION**

Spiritual and moral values of the Maris are reflected in folklore and traditions. Outlook of the Maris is reflected in their relation to the surrounding world - the earth, sky, the sun, the moon, rivers, lakes, springs, forest and its inhabitants - animals, birds, and insects. Following the rules and principles established by the ancestors the Maris believe in preserving harmony with nature, relatives. Folk wisdom was worked out over the centuries; from experience and observations tips appeared. Suggestions and restrictions that became gradually life principles and guidelines people had to follow strictly.

The most part of Mari prohibitions, bans and taboos are related with ancient pagan cult concepts. The Maris distinguished them from the natural environment and they became the objects of worship. People believed that their life and prosperity depended on the principles of respecting taboos. Their function was to emphasize respect for the objects of worship. Taboo observance ensured the protection of these forces, security and well-being of a family and relatives (Abukaeva, Krasnova, Kabaeva, 2016, pp. 1772-1775).

## **2 METHODOLOGY**

This work is devoted to the analysis of Mari taboo in relation to the sacred groves and trees. The article traces the parallels with the taboo of other Finno-Ugric peoples, considered forbidden prayers, everyday stories, and dreams. The material of this paper is based on ethnographic sources of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The data collected by Lyubov Abukaeva during her expeditions in the Republic of Mari El, Republic of Bashkortostan and Tatarstan was analyzed.

## **3 MARI TABOOS RELATED WITH SACRED GROVES AND TREES**

Observing the nature, drawing analogies between objects and phenomena of the world, ancient people drew conclusions, produced rules and laws that determined the range of restrictions and prohibitions. So, having seen the growth of trees and how the trees came to life in spring and fell into a state of sleep in autumn people concluded that the trees were alive. The Maris thought that trees felt the pain like people. Consequently, it was prohibited to cut and break without any special needs. And if one wanted to cut down a tree for personal needs, then it had to be done in the time specified, and only getting permission from the forest owner.

In relation to the objects of worship, a system of various norms, prescriptions and prohibitions is formed, which has an aim to stress special, respectful and reverent attitude of a man to natural forces and to ensure the protection of good forces over a family, a tribe, as well as the neutralization of evil forces, defeating them. Taboos associated with the pagan cults of the Mari religion are the most ancient. They are included in the system of religious ideas and regulations.

An important object of worship of the Maris is the forest (chodyra in Mari). According to the Maris, a forest is a temple, a place of temporary habitation of different gods. The Maris offered up a prayer, made a sacrifice to the gods in the sacred groves. A forest is protection: it was possible to hide from enemies there, to save life, identity and faith. The forest is a breadwinner for the Maris. Hunting and gathering were the main activities of our ancestors. Being the symbol of prosperity of people, the forest has held and holds a special place in the material and spiritual culture of the Maris. S.A. Nurminskiy in XIX century wrote that the forest was the magical world for Cheremis people: the whole fabulous world of Mari is related with forests and its inhabitants, all the riddles and proverbs are devoted to it (Nurminskiy, 1862, p. 242).

Many taboos are devoted to forests: Чодыраште шўшкаш ок йөрө – корнет йомдарет; Чодыраште кычкырлаш ок йөрө – чодыра озам лўдыктет (Abukaeva, 1989) 'It is impossible to whistle in a forest or you'll frighten the master of a forest' A similar ban was found in Mordva mythological views: 'One cannot scream in a forest. If Viryava answers one can get lost or one will go to perdition' (Nurminskiy, 1862, p. 67). For violating the ban a man can be punished - he gets lost.

To get out of the woods, the Eastern Maris advise to change shoes from the right foot to the left one, or turn a scarf inside out. According to Udmurt taboos if one gets lost in the woods, s/he must turn the clothes inside out, change shoes: only then it will be possible to get on the right road (Vladykina, 1997).

A traveler can lose his/her way, sometimes even for a few days. If s/he goes to pick mushrooms for example, s/he can be stopped or frightened by evil spirits. According to Mari beliefs, evil spirits are able to throw the horse onto a tree, or scare, tickle it or exhaust to death. However, the key moment in the perception of the forest master is that the forest is the sphere, the field where everything is focused on the master of a forest but not on a human being. It is not acceptable to a human being to violate the order, to be angry with the owner of a forest. It is forbidden to treat a forest injuriously, to cut the forest master's favorite trees, to pick mushrooms and berries, to kill animals of the forest owners. Finally, a man must not be in those places where the forest master stays. There is a rule against swearing in the woods - a man should sing a song. If a human being violates these rules s/he should apologize for that (Abukaeva, 1989). Some trees are also the objects of veneration. There are general prohibitions against all living things: Эртен кайымаште, чодыраште але нурышто, пушенгым кўрышт-руышт кошташ каласыме огыл. Ме пушенгым илышылан шотлена, тудым логалаш ок лий. Мемнан тодылмо але руалме дене ала-мыняр пушенге шортын-йўсланен шога, кошкен пыта. Ме, сулыккан айдеме-шамыч, пушенге деч посна ик кечымат илен она

керт. Тыгак киндым, шудым, вольыкым, моло кушкылым, янлыкым эпере логалаш каласыме огыл (Popov, 1991). 'In woods and fields one cannot tear leaves and cut trees. We believe the trees are alive and that is why they cannot be touched. When we break or cut them, we do not know how many trees weep and suffer, or get dry. We are sinful people, we cannot live a day without trees. Also it is impossible to disturb in vain crops, herbs, animals'.

The Maris respect firs, oaks, maples, pines, birches, lindens, mountain ashes, bird cherries. Birch, linden and oak groves are the places of prayer and sacrifice, where a man should maintain order and cleanliness, and it is strictly forbidden to break branches, pluck the leaves, mow grass, and pick mushrooms and berries. Sacred groves (in Mari - ото, кӱсото) are places of cult ceremonies where a fire is made from special firewood brought from a village to cook sacrificial food. Respected people say the ritual words to gods and countrymen. There are so called family trees in sacred grove. There is a sacred tree in honor of each deity in a grove: this tree in Mari is called онапу. It should be noted that an oak, a linden, a birch are the trees of the highest deities; a fir-tree is a tree of the lowest deities. People come to sacred groves when they are not healthy, when they face problems, when something goes wrong in a family, in a village. The Maris believe that the kind force of a grove brings a consolation, helps solve the problems and recover.

Sacred groves are inviolable. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century A. Nechayev wrote that 'in some places they were fenced. Most of them are protected. When Cheremis found that their prayer grounds were broken, they brought there a goose or a chicken to cook. They asked gods to put to death the person who had cut trees' (Nechaev, 1910).

Sacred groves are an integral part of the religious practices of the Maris, a form of ethnic identification. Based on the popular beliefs related with sacred groves a comprehensive system of taboos had been developed. One cannot cut trees, stand out firewood, pick mushrooms, flowers. A man can be punished by a grove. There are many stories about punishment for breaking these rules.

It is not allowed to litter, swear, and quarrel in sacred groves. People should go there on holidays wearing clean clothes because groves considered being the place of communication with higher forces of nature [Nizhny Novgorod, p. 208]. Rules of behavior in sacred groves are very conservative. It is banned to take photos there, anyway, one can get old very quickly: Кумалтыш воктен возалташ ок йӧрӧ – йыле шонгемат. (Abukaeva, 1990).

The sacred grove is able to help a person fight with evil force. Evil visions disappear, if a person throws rowan-tree branch taken from a sacred grove. It is not allowed to break anything in a grove, however, as it is possible to break rowan-tree with impunity to save someone's life. (Maris Living in Nizhniy Novgorod, 1994, pp. 213-214).

Trees are characterized by the redemptive power. For example, in the Nizhny Novgorod region Romachinskaya linden is widely known. In case of being ill people offer sacrifices in a form of food or money. Money is buried in the ground near the roots of the tree. It is believed that the person who steals or takes that money will be struck by madness, or s/he will die soon (Maris Living in Nizhniy Novgorod, 1994, p. 227).

Every Mari village has stories about how a grove punishes people for breaking branch there. The Maris could be punished by death for listening to priest's prayer. (Maris Living in Nizhniy Novgorod, 1994, p. 231). Earlier many taboos had developed among women, for example they were not allowed to visit sacred groves. The situation has changed nowadays and it is explained by reduction of men (Maris Living in Nizhniy Novgorod, 1994).

A.A. Fux gives the following description of behavior in Mari sacred groves: 'They take a bath at home in advance, they do not eat anything before going to a grove, put on nice and clean clothes. It is not allowed to go to the toilet on the territory of a sacred grove. One should go half a mile away and then s/he has to change a shirt. That is why they take clean clothes with them to the grove'.

It is strictly prohibited to touch a pot before offering a sacrifice. It is forbidden the presence of strangers during praying about the rain (Maris Living in Nizhniy Novgorod, 1994, p. 232).

According to the Maris, bird-cherry trees, mountain ashes, dog-roses have special impeccable power and the ability to cast out evil spirits. The branches of dog-roses and rowan trees are necessarily put in a coffin to fight the malevolent spirits (Nechaev, 1910, p. 2). Тумым шындаш ок йӧрӧ – тумо шӱй кӱжгыт лиеш, айдеме кола (Abukaeva, 1990). 'It is not allowed to plant an oak near a house. As soon as it get thick as a man's neck a man, who planted it, will die'; Куэ воктен шкетын велалташ ок йӧрӧ – тулыкеш кодат (Abukaeva, 1990). 'One cannot be photographed near a birth alone – s/he will be deserted'; Шкет куэм ондал шогалаш ок йӧрӧ – шкет кодат (Abukaeva, 1989). 'It is prohibited to hug the lonely growing birth –

one will be alone'; Пöрт воктен улшо пушенгым йöрыкташ ок йöрö – колшо лектеш (куэ – ўдырамаш, кож – пöръен) (Abukaeva, 1990). 'You cannot cut down trees near a house; otherwise, someone in your family will die. A birch symbolizes a woman, an oak – a man (Evseev, 1994, p. 70). Пушенгым, лышташ лекмек, йöрыкташ, пўчкедаш ок йöрö – пўртўс озам сырыктет (Abukaeva, 1989). 'It is banned to cut trees when they are in leaves. The nature master will be angry.' There is a prohibition to cut a birch for birch sap, one will cry a lot.

#### **4 CONCLUSION**

Prohibitions of the Maris are inscribed in religious, ethical, aesthetic ideas. They regulate the relationship between a man and nature, define the hierarchy of relations between the members of the ethnic community and a family, have a great educational effect, and harmonize the inner world.

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#### **REFERENCE LIST**

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