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IN SEARCH OF THE NATIONAL IDEA:

**Cultural Revival and Traditional Religiosity in the
Chuvash Republic**

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Executive summary

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a national movement emerged in Chuvashia. The Chuvash, a Turkic speaking people from the middle Volga region, are the fourth largest national group in today's Russia. In the national movement that developed there, a revival of traditional Chuvash spirituality, as part of a search for national roots and a national idea, was a key element. This paper examines how leaders of the national movement have drawn on Chuvash history and religion in their conceptions of the national idea, and shows how they used rituals as an expression of ethnic consciousness and a method of cultural unification. It then probes the ways that activists have sought to reformulate traditional beliefs into a national religion and explores the conflicts that these attempts have provoked.

In June 1996, the newly reconstructed waterfront in the capital city Cheboksary was officially opened with a lavish ceremony led by the President of the Republic, Nikolai Fedorov, and attended by the Patriarch of All Russia, Alexei II. "We have built a road to the temple" the President declared.¹ In a literal sense, he was referring to the construction of an embankment leading to one of the city's oldest Orthodox churches. But his phrase had a symbolic meaning as well. Metaphorically the phrase equated the physical reconstruction of the capital city with the cultural and spiritual revival of the Chuvash nation.

Two years earlier a different ceremony had taken place, one also connected with construction, but of an entirely different order. In 1994, a group of Chuvash intellectuals erected a sacred column (*yupa*) intended for collective sacrifices and prayers on the site of an unfinished communist monument.² The event was held by participants in the second meeting of the Chuvash National Congress and was dedicated to the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Chuvash Republic and the 1100th anniversary of the Volga Bolgar state. The site, located in a large park not far from the center of Cheboksary, was to include an ethnographic center with special ceremonial buildings, shrines of the ancient Chuvash religion. The plans also stipulated the construction of residential housing and maintenance buildings, a water mill, and also the building of roads, a cafeteria and a hotel to serve visiting believers, pilgrims and tourists. The creators hoped it would become a temple in the Chuvash national religion and a symbol of the spiritual unity of the nation.

In contrast to the "road to the temple," which was greeted with a chorus of acclaim, the dedication of the prayer column provoked a storm of passion and controversy. Chuvash Christians,

¹ . A description of the opening of waterfront can be found in *Sovremennaia Chuvashiia* (Cheboksary, 1997) p. 37.

² . The construction of the *Yupa*, a wooden column adorned with stylized carvings of faces and the human figure, is an integral part of the rituals of mourning and remembrance in the traditional Chuvash religion. For more information about the *yupa*, see Ashmarin N.I. *Slovar' chuvashskogo iazyka*. Vyp.4, (Cheboksary, 1929), pp. 346-347; P. V. Denisov, *Religioznye verovaniia chuvash* (Cheboksary, 1959), p.149-150; A..A. Trofimov, *Chuvashskaia narodnaia kul'tovaia skul'ptura* (Cheboksary, 1993); E.A. Iagafova, *Samarskiie chuvashi* (Samara, 1998). p.231-234.

outraged by the prospect of a return to “paganism,” swamped local newspapers with a flood of angry letters and articles.³ Supporters of the “national religion” defended their plans with equal vigor.⁴ The site itself was soon vandalized, however, and the plans for a Chuvash national temple never got off the drawing board. But the controversy over the use of the site continues to this day.

Both events demonstrate the prominence of religion and tradition in contemporary processes of national development. They also show the disagreements and conflicts inherent in the process of “national revival”.⁵ In tracing the connection between these two events we can see the ways in which religion has been used to define the concept of the “national idea,” becoming a medium for the expression of Chuvash national consciousness.

The Chuvash, Russia’s fourth largest nationality, are a Turkic speaking people of the Middle Volga Region. In contrast to other Turkic peoples, who generally practice Islam, the Chuvash are nominally Orthodox Christians, having undergone forced conversion in the 18th century. Many Chuvash, however, continued throughout the Tsarist period to adhere to traditional beliefs. Villages in the

³ . The parishioners of the Holy Trinity Monastery, for example, sent a letter with 362 signatures: “Net ni ellina, ni iudeia’ - pered bogom vse ravny.” *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, no. 167, August 22, 1995. The parishioners of the Uspensky Church in the village of Akulievo, Cheboksarskii raion, sent a letter with 114 signatures: “Mozhno li ikh nazvat’ intelligentami?” *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, no. 185, September 15, 1995. See also, B. Mironov, “Dlia chego shum vokrug stolba?” *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, September 29, 1995; I. Andreev, “V detstvo ne vozvrashaiutsia. K sporam o vozrozhdenii iazychestva,” *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, September 5, 1995, p. 3; Iu. Mikhailov, “Manshan CHNK temshenske ike khutla iapala pek tuianche,” *Khypar keneki*, no. 16, Shupashkar, 1995, avan 20, p. 11.

⁴ . The leader of the Chuvash nature, religion and spirituality group, “Turas”, F. Madurov, published “Ne sotriasajte vozdukh izmyshleniiami”, *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, September 29, 1995; see also T’vash “Net very bez goneniia?”, *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, no. 185, September 15, 1995; and Gennadii Eniseev “Eshche raz o kaftane s oborkami”, *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, August 11, 1995.

⁵ . The concept of “national revival” itself has been the object of considerable controversy in recent literature. See, for example, A.A Tkachenko, “Tiurkskie narody: vozrozhdeniie ili razvitie?” *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie*, 1996, no. 4, p. 65-75; I.E Elaeva, “Buriatskaia intelligentsiia: dominanty etnicheskogo samoopredeleniia.” *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie*, no. 2, 1998, p. 126-139; Iu.P Shabaev, “Ideologiia natsional’nykh dvizhenii finno-ugorskikh narodov Rossii i ee vospriiatie obshchestvennym mneniiem.” *Etnograficheskoe obozreniie*, no. 3, 1998, p. 119-128. In the case of the Chuvash it is probably more appropriate to speak not of “national revival” as such, but of “national development” in connection with the process of linguistic and cultural assimilation. Information on the Chuvash cultural revival movement can be found mainly in local periodicals. See, for example, S.Filatov, A.Shchipkov, “Iazychestvo. Rozhdenie ili vozrozhdenie,” *Druzhiba narodov*, no. 11-12, 1994; “Narod Chuvashii vybiraet veru,” *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, no 169, August, 1995; V.Avanmart “Traditsii i religiia (vzgliad iznutri)” *Chavash’en*, no. 38, 1997, p. 8; “Vozrozhdeniie kultury - samaia blagorodnaia zadacha,” *Chavash’en*, no. 42, September 17-24, 1992.

Chuvash diaspora of Samara Oblast' and Urals region can be found that maintain the pre-Christian religion up to the present day.⁶

In the late 1980s and early 1990s a national movement emerged in Chuvashia. The revival of traditional Chuvash spirituality, the search for national roots and a national idea became key issues in its program.⁷ In this article, I will first examine how leaders of the national movement have drawn on Chuvash history and religion in their conceptions of the national idea. I will then discuss their use of rituals as an expression of ethnic consciousness and a method of cultural unification, and, finally, I will probe the ways in which national activists have sought to reformulate traditional beliefs into a national religion.

The national movement was given formal incarnation in October 1992 with the convening of the first Chuvash National Congress (ChNK). The "Chuvash Idea" was proclaimed as its guiding ideology.⁸ At that stage, the "Chuvash Idea" was envisioned largely in political terms as the "idea of national rebirth" and the "strategy for the development of Chuvash statehood." The movement's leader, Atner Khusangai, defined the Chuvash idea as the "right to self-determination...and autonomous economic, social and cultural development."⁹ The Chuvash idea, in this rendition, was an ideological doctrine and a political strategy, inspired by the example of the Baltic States, the immediate goals of which included the

⁶. See E. A. Iagafova, *Samarskie Chuvashi*, pp. 308-313; and *Chuvashi Priural'ia: kul'turno-bytovye protsessy* (Cheboksary, 1989), p. 31.

⁷. *Chuvashskaia natsiia (sosal'no-kul'tyrnyi oblik). K chuvashskomy natsional'nomy kongressu* (Cheboksary, 1992); *Chuvash nazi kongresse. Chuvashskii natsional'nyi kongress. Sbornik dokumentov i materialov* (Shupashkar, 1994).

⁸. "Govoriat uchastniki kongressa", *Chavash'en*, no.42(89), October 17, 1992, p.17-24; "CHNK prizyvaet ob'edinit'sia vokrug idei vazrozhdeniia," *Chavash'en*, no.42(89), October 17, 1992.

⁹. A.P. Khuzangai, "Gorizonty postimperskoi chuvashskoi kul'tiry". *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, June 26, 1993, p. 5-7; A.P. Khuzangai "Tret'e vozrozhdenie chuvashskogo naroda". *Chuvash'en*, no.19(118) 1993, p. 4.

development of ties with international organizations, with neighboring republics, and with the Chuvash diaspora.¹⁰

But the Chuvash idea could not have been proclaimed without its prehistory, without its connection with the cultural legacy and traditions of the people. The idea of state sovereignty needed to have a foundation and roots in the past. How, then, was national tradition defined and given symbolic expression within the national movement?

Khusangai, as the leader of the Chuvash National Congress, suggested three basic traditions out of which Chuvash national culture emerged.¹¹ First, he extended the Chuvash historical narrative back to an earlier starting point with the founding of the Volga-Bulgar state in the 10th century. This was an assertion of early Chuvash statehood – subsequently lost in the wake of the Tatar-Mongol invasion and the absorption of the Chuvash into the Russian Empire.¹² Secondly, Khusangai emphasized the “native Chuvash national tradition,” “the old Chuvash faith, folk art and folklore,” which comprised the core of all Chuvash culture, and retained its resilience and viability up to the present day. The third tradition was “Christian enlightenment,” a movement which gave birth in the 19th century to the first generation of the

¹⁰ On January 19, 1993, The ChNK was accepted as a member of the Unrepresented National and Peoples Organization (UNPO) and took part in the work of the 3rd UNPO general assembly: “Problemy naroda my staraemsia vynesti na mezhdunarodnyi pravovoi uroven'. Beseda A. Khuzangaia s korrespondentom”. *Chuvash'en*, no. 11, 1994, p. 7. The UNPO was founded in 1991 as an alternative to the United Nations by “representatives of occupied nations, indigenous peoples, minorities, and other disenfranchised peoples who currently struggle to preserve their cultural identities, protect their basic human rights, safeguard the environment or regain their lost countries.” See <http://www.unpo.ee/> (12/12/99). ChNK was one of the organizers of the Assembly of the Peoples of Volga-Urals region (ANPU) - the founding congress of which took place on February 25-26, 1994 in Cheboksary.

¹¹ A.P. Khuzangai, “Gorizonty postimperskoi chuvashskoi kul'tury,” *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, June 26, 1993. p. 7-9.

¹² *Ibid.* Prior to the formulations of A. Khuzangai, the Volga Bulgar empire had not been so directly connected with the idea of Chuvash statehood. On the conceptions of early Chuvash nationalists, such as the G. Aliunov, T. Khuri (Nikolaev), Metri - Iuman, S. Nikolaev, G. Komissarov - Vander and N. V. Nikol'skii, see *Problemy natsional'nogo v razvitiu chuvashskogo naroda. Sbornik statei.* (Cheboksary, 1999). Polemics between Chuvash and Tatar scholars over the legacy of the Volga Bulgar state have been ongoing since at least the end of the Second World War. The topic has reemerged in recent years in connection with the questions of “lost” statehood. See *Bolgari i Chuvashi.* Cheboksary, 1984; V.A.Shnirel'man, *Who gets the past? Competition for Ancestors among Non-Russian Intellectuals in Russia* (Washington, D.C. 1997).

Chuvash intelligentsia and brought the Chuvash into world civilization without breaking ties with the “native soil.”

The views of Khusangai are shared by a large part of the intelligentsia. Many scholarly works and popular histories have been written in this vein seeking to “reveal” to the people its heroic past, and define the cultural values that bring about unity.¹³ Such appeals to tradition create a sensation of continuity, an unbroken narrative of the life of the nation.

But the nationalist approach to tradition reveals a contradiction. On the one hand ideologists of the national movement emphasize the need to revive and reconstruct that which has been “forgotten” and “lost” in the spiritual and cultural legacy. On the other hand, they assert the continuity of tradition: the present is perceived through an idealized vision of a past, which continues to live in the present. But even this contradiction serves certain functions. The symbolic depiction of tradition as ancient and forgotten, regardless of its actual state, intensifies its value for the contemporary nation. The very processes of “rebirth” and “creation” give to the actions of nationalist ideologists an air of sanctity. By asserting that tradition has been “forgotten,” its “revivers” legitimize a variety of readings and interpretations related to their particular interests and to external conditions. At the same time notions of the permanence, the longevity and the vitality of tradition create the impression of continuity and stability during a period of transition and economic crisis.

Thus, national traditions and historical memory provide the ideologists of Chuvash nationalism with symbols of identity capable of serving as foundations for national development. But for these symbolic elements to serve their function, a mechanism must exist to communicate their message to a

¹³ . For example: V.D. Dimitriev, *Chuvashskie istoricheskie predaniia. Ocherki istorii chuvashskogo naroda s drevneishih vremen do serediny XIX veka*, (Cheboksary, 1993); Mishshi Iukhma, *Drevnie chuvashskie bogi i geroi. Legendy i mify Drevnei Chuvashii*. (Cheboksary, 1996); Idem, *Drevnie chuvashi. Istoricheskie ocherki*. (Cheboksary, 1998).

broader public. Rituals play an important role in this process.¹⁴ All concrete steps undertaken by the Chuvash National Congress in the political arena are accompanied by rituals expressing a vision of the national ideology. Every meeting of the Chuvash National Congress is opened with a ritual blessing (*pilleni*) by the elders, performed on the stage in front of the presidium. A Council of Elders – “*Vattisen khurale*” – elected from among the most respected and honored elderly members of the organization, functions continuously within the context of the ChNK.¹⁵ Prayers with ritual sacrifices attended by prominent nationalists are also performed on the territory of collective farms, with the kolkhoz chairmen hosting and participating in the ceremonies.¹⁶ Rituals are even held outside the Republic in areas containing sites that are considered sacred in the Chuvash religion.¹⁷ Pilgrimages have been organized on a regular basis to these sites, drawing many participants from the Chuvash youth.¹⁸

Over the past decade the spaces chosen for ritual activities have changed in accordance with the changing political context and attitudes of authorities toward the supporters of traditional religion. Initially, the ritual activities were largely carried out in urban locations likely to attract the greatest attention. Now, however, they are performed for the most part in villages, among the “true Chuvash”

¹⁴. The functions of ritual as a mechanism of adaptation in times of crisis and social transformation have been repeatedly traced and analyzed in the anthropological literature. See, for example, V. Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Harmondsworth, 1974); Michael Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (Chapel Hill, 1980); Laurel Kendall, “Korean Shamans and the Spirits of Capitalism,” *American Anthropologist* v. 98, no. 3, pp. 512-527; Charles F. Keyes, Laurel Kendall and Helen Hardacre, eds. *Asian Visions of Authority: Religion and the Modern States of East and Southeast Asia*. (Honolulu, 1994); Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Terror and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*. (Chicago, 1980); Catherine Wanner “*The Burden of Dreams*”. *History and identity in Post-Soviet Ukraine*. (Philadelphia, 1998).

¹⁵. “III s'ezd ChNK v Cheboksarakh,” *Chavash en*, no. 45 (346), 1997, p.2.

¹⁶. On June 6, 1992, for example, a “great prayer” (*Chuk*) was held on the “Leninskaia iskra” collective farm in the Iadrin region. See I. Andreev, “V detstvo ne vozvrashaiutsia. K sporam o vozrozhdenii iazychestva,” *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*. September 5, 1995, p.3.

¹⁷. One example is *Valem-Khusa*, located in the Tatar Republic, a sacred grove and archeological site dating back to the time of the Volga Bulgars. See V. Avamart, “Traditsii i religiia (vzgliad iznutri),” *Chavash'en*. no 38, 1997.

¹⁸. Timer Aktash, “V efire - letnie vstrechi na zemle predkov,” *Chavash'en* , no. 37, 1994, p.9.

population that has preserved the language and spiritual values and is least touched by the Russian urban culture.

But even in such cases, as rituals are brought before the public eye they are transformed. The closed, hidden quality of traditional rituals, carefully concealed from strangers and the uninitiated, disappears on these occasions. The masses openly partake in the sacredness of the moment both directly and through the mass media. Where in the rituals of traditional society all the participants play an active role, in the revived Chuvash rituals there are participants and spectators. The action unfolds in accordance with a carefully crafted script, known beforehand only to the performers. Players in the rituals are not the “respected village elders,” but educated intellectuals who declare themselves to be the guardians of traditions, the descendants of the ancient priests, possessors of secret knowledge and bearers of historical memory. Drawing on the writings of academic historians and ethnographers depicting Chuvash religion as it existed a century ago, the authors attribute less importance to contemporary spiritual life as it actually exists in a variety of localities among different groups of the populations.

Nonetheless it is precisely the visible, physically perceptible form of “religious truths” transmitted through ritual, as opposed to abstract scholastic discussions, that make such performances accessible and comprehensible to the people. While there may be few “true believers” sharing to the fullest the views of the organizers, even “passive” spectators can feel a sense of unity, a common bond created not only with one another, but across generations. The cares and tribulations of present-day society are refracted in ritual through the prism of the imagined past and reflected back into the present in a different light.

There is practically no disagreement among participants in the national movement over the use of ritual as an affirmation of national community and the national idea.¹⁹ Serious differences, however,

¹⁹ . Of course, not all members of the ChNK are active supporters of the return to pre-Christian religious forms. At the same time, the religious affiliation of ChNK members, who include Orthodox Christians and possibly even sympathizers with the ideas of Pan-Islamism, does not serve as grounds for confrontation. The movement itself for the revival of traditional religion is notable for its peaceful character and religious toleration.

emerge over the actual content of the national idea. While some, like Khusangai, envision the national movement largely in political terms, for many others issues of spiritual, moral and cultural development take precedence over political, social and juridical demands. Traditional folk religion becomes the central ideological focus for this group, standing in opposition to Orthodoxy, Islam and processes of assimilation. But for Chuvash spirituality to fulfill this role it must be reconstructed and reformulated to take on the stature of a major world religion. This task has become a central theme of intellectual life in the Chuvash republic.

Since 1990, a variety of groups have emerged dedicated to the goal of reviving the ancient Chuvash religion. For example, in the Chuvash State Institute of the Humanities, a group entitled "Chuvash National Religion," consisting of ethnographers, linguists, art critics and other intellectuals, has engaged in intense research, studying and systematizing the traditional Chuvash religion.²⁰ In the past few years a whole series of monographs devoted to this problem has appeared, along with an enormous quantity of publications in the periodical press. Artists and sculptors have joined the scholars in the creation of models for reconstructing the *Keremet* (sacred trees serving as sites for the performance of prayers and sacrifice) and creating ritual-ceremonial complexes.²¹ It is precisely this group that has taken the initiative to introduce periodic prayer rituals into public life. Members of the group have given the religion its own name – *Sardash*.²² However the group is far from uniform in its understanding of the content of the national religion.

²⁰. Members of this group include A. Trofimov, V. Rodionov, N. Naumov, N. Egorov, E. Eragin, A. Kibech, and V. Stan'ial.

²¹. V. Petrov, N. Enilin, P. Pupin, F. Madurov, G. Isaev, "Drevnechuvashskaia religiia – Sardash." *Chavash'en*, no.24, June 13, 1992, p.12; Stan'ial V.P., "Vokrug nasional'noi religii i verovaniia," *Chavash'en*, no.43-44, 1997.

²². The word "Sardash" is apparently derived from the Chuvash "Sara" meaning yellow (a Turkic borrowing from the Iranian language group.) "Sar," "Sarat" is an epithet for the sun and spring. The name symbolized the connection between the Chuvash religion and Zoroastrianism in which fire and sun worship occupied a prominent place. "Sardon" is the name of a Chuvash keremet and "Sardavan" is the place in which it is located. See N.E. Ashmarin, *Slovar' chuvashskogo iazyka*. vyp. 11, p. 74-75. Cheboksary, 1936.

Iosif Dmitriev, for example, an art critic and director of the National Drama Theatre, argues that there is no need to rush into a premature and artificial “revival” of archaic rituals connected with the Chuvash religion. First, Chuvash beliefs should be modernized and a set canon of dogmas, sacred texts and ceremonies should be created. Only then should the religion be “offered” to the people. Once the Chuvash faith is reconstituted as an organized monotheistic religion centered around the God Tura, a highly disciplined church organization modeled on the Roman Catholic Church should be created.²³

In contrast to Dmitriev, who feels that intellectuals should define and codify the dogmas of the Chuvash faith, V. Stan’ial argues that the Chuvash belief already exists in its fully developed form. The Chuvash religion, he asserts, is far more ancient than Christianity and Islam, is closely related to Zoroastrianism, and is made up of a harmonious pantheon organized in a systematic hierarchy. Despite the fact that many Gods are found in the pantheon, Stan’ial also tries to depict Chuvash religion as a monotheistic system, arguing that the primary god has many manifestations. Stan’ial even sees in the Chuvash religion the structure of a church hierarchy extending from *El'men* who leads the entire nation, to the *Aramchi*, the guardian of the faith in every Chuvash village. In addition, he lists an array of sacred objects: emblems, banners, incense burners and even a pulpit for the High Priest.²⁴

The parallels here to the rites and structures of the Russian Orthodox Church are obvious. None of these attributes, however, have been documented in any detail in the historical and ethnographic sources. Stan’ial himself admits that ethnographers were never able to meet with a single High Priest (*El'men*) since none have survived to the present day, and in the past, to preserve secrecy, they always

²³. Dmitriev suggests a doctrine close to the Christian trinity: the God Tura, the divine primordial mother Ama and the bread god (God the son, Christ is one of the human incarnations of the bread god.) Tura-god the creator, Dmitriev teaches, is one for all religion, but he has various prophets and national forms of worship. S. Filatov, A. Shchipkov “Iazychestvo. Rozdenie ili vozrozhdenie ?” *Lik Chuvashii*, no. 1-2 1996, pp. 210-223. See also “Chuvashskaia provinsiiia v kontekste evropeiskoi kul'tury: razgovor za kruglym stolom.” *Lik Chuvashii*, no. 2, 1995, pp. 89-95; Iu. Iakovlev, “ Chavash tene pussarisem valli mar val...” *Khypar*, January 29, 1999.” In a recent conversation (Personal interview with Iosef Dmitriev, Cheboksary, August 1999), Dmitriev emphasized that he does not participate in public prayers and the dedication of sacred sites and is opposed to “expensive rituals” and attempts to “predict the behavior of society.”

²⁴ . V. Stan’ial, “Karavan pribavit shagu,” *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, November 5, 1992, p. 2.

denied participating in rituals. It was only after a special decision of the Council of Elders (*Vattisen khurape*) in 1990, Stan'ial claims, that basic information about the ancient religion was "declassified" making it possible to write openly about its features.²⁵

The idea of Chuvash religion as a form of Zoroastrianism expressed by Stan'ial, has drawn greater support in recent years. The Chuvash, it is argued, are the only people of Eurasia to have preserved in any substantive way the teachings of Zoroaster. In addition to serving as an alternative to Christianity and Islam, Zoroastrianism is attractive in that it provides a clear and forceful framework for the expression of ecological issues – a major concern of the activists involved in the national movement.²⁶ "Zoroastrianism demands from its faithful, a Chuvash scholar writes, diligent care for the purity of earth, water and flame... Like other Zoroastrians, the Chuvash understand God to be all of nature, and therefore have not erected temples of worship and do not erect them to this day, performing, instead the '*chuk*' or worship under the open sky, in the bosom of nature."²⁷

The activities of the supporters of the "ecological" tendency are centered around the Chuvash Nature Religion and Spirituality group, "Turas" (a believer in the God Tura). The group's leader, the sculptor F. Madurov, sums up the content of the Chuvash spiritual idea in the postulate of the "unity and harmony of Nature, Mankind and the One God Tura."²⁸ Madurov sees nature as the temple of the

²⁵. Much of this information eventually found its way into a high school textbook that Stan'ial published in the Chuvash language in 1993. See V.P.Staniial, "Tabuirovannyi panteon chuvashskoi religii," *Vtoroi mezhdunarodnyi kongress etnografov i antropologov*. June 1-5 1997. Part 2. Ufa, 1997; V.P. Nikitin (Stan'ial) "Tabuirovannyi panteon chuvashskoi religii," *Problemy natsional'nogo v razvitii chuvashskogo naroda* (Cheboksary, 1999), pp.248-259; V.P.Staniial, "Edinstvo diaspori: kul'tyrno-territirial'nye avtonomii natsii," *Chavash-en*. 1997, no 43-44.

²⁶. Ideas associated with ecology are found in various forms in practically all "neo-pagan" movements in the former Soviet Union. See V.A. Shnirel'man, *Neoiazychestvo i natsionalizm: Vostochno-evropeiskii areal*. (Moscow, 1998).

²⁷. A.Izorkin, V. Prokhorova. "Zoroastrizm, dar Drevnego Vostoka..." p.11.

²⁸. *Ibid.*

Chuvash religion based on the tradition of the *Keremet*, the Chuvash legend of God resurrected in a tree growing on ashes, symbolizing the rebirth of man through nature.

In practice, the immediate goals of the group "Turas" lie in the creation of spiritual revival complexes on the site of *Keremets*. These centers are envisioned as sites of pilgrimages and faith healing and are to be located in state nature preserves.²⁹ In this way, Turas strives to turn *keremets* into cultural monuments, thereby utilizing spaces long endowed with spiritual meaning, and connected with historical memory and mythology as a "center" for the propagation of their particular version of the Chuvash religion.

In all of the various conceptions of the Chuvash National Religion, the role of intellectuals stands out as a common feature. In unifying local cults and traditions into a cohesive religious system, Chuvash intellectuals cast themselves in the role of charismatic leaders responding to and shaping the mood and thoughts of the populace. Within the new religion they attain status as the theologians and prophets of the national faith, as High Priests, Sorcerers and Healers, trying in this way to reaffirm their authoritative position in society.

How does the population of the Chuvash Republic respond to the "ritual-ceremonial" practices of its intelligentsia? Here we can only offer some preliminary observations. Undoubtedly, the national movement has exerted a substantial influence in recent years, an influence manifested in the revival of the Chuvash language, in a growing interest in Chuvash history and tradition and, for a relatively small group, in direct participation in the mass events staged by the national movement. Scholarly works, historical novels, essays and press coverage have played a significant role in deepening interest and conveying legitimacy to the activities of the national movement.

²⁹. For example in the "Zavol'zhe" natural reserve, established in 1995 by order of the Chuvash President, a well-known *keremet* (Amaksarskaia) has become a site of pilgrimage both for the Chuvash and for the neighboring peoples, the Marii and the Tatars. D.Madurov, "Unikal'nyi kompleks kul'tovogo znacheniiia XIII veka," *Chavash'en*, no.5, February, 27, 1995.

At the same time, the actual religious doctrines and reconstructed rituals offered by the national movement have not attracted broad support from within the population. The newly formulated ceremonies remain foreign, without any comprehensible content. Quite often they are perceived as theatrical folklore staged to coincide with national holidays. And to the extent that the idealized historical narratives and religious doctrines offered by the intelligentsia do penetrate into popular life, they are perceived idiosyncratically, and are integrated into daily life in ways that may bear little relation to the original expectations of the leaders.

In rural areas, for example, a new trend can be observed which is clearly spontaneous and autonomous in character as opposed to the practices described above. The Christian feast of the Trinity (*Troitsa*) and the prechristian observance of *Semik* with which it coincides have acquired the features of a mass religious event. During this time, a "pilgrimage" takes place from the cities to villages where the graves of ancestors and loved ones are located. People return to their native villages to honor the memory of their forefathers and remember their roots. National religious activists have created and performed rituals in connection with these events. But the broad popularity of Trinity Sunday and *Semik* is not so much a sign of awakening cultural awareness under the influence of the national intelligentsia as it is an indication of the growing influence of the Orthodox Church, and the integration of Orthodox rituals into the everyday lives of ordinary people in a comprehensible, meaningful and accessible form. Similar processes have been noted by researchers among Russians and Finno-Ugrian peoples of the region

Recently village festivals (*ialzri*) have been growing in popularity. This is a relatively new phenomenon brought about, it would appear, under the influence of Republic-wide holidays such as the Day of the Republic, the Day of the City and the festival Akatui. In some areas these holidays coincide with Orthodox feast days. But in a number of cases, they take place at the initiative of the urban intelligentsia with the support of the local administration. On these occasions reconstructed prayers and blessings (*pil*, *pekhel*, *khalal*) are performed along with ritual actions (sacrifices) over which

“authoritative individuals” (i.e. self-appointed priests from the intelligentsia) preside. Such rituals are connected with life and family cycle ceremonies and traditional rites of passage such as weddings, births, anniversaries and the seeing off of recruits to the army.³⁰ Villagers can observe and participate in these rituals regardless of their formal religious affiliation. Syncretism has always been an important aspect of Chuvash spirituality, and there is no reason to suppose that the interweaving of elements from diverse religious and cultural world-views will not encompass the Chuvash National Religion as well.

Among Orthodox Christian Chuvash, the revival of pre-Christian religion has provoked adamant opposition. Not only does the new religion pose an obvious threat to the status of the Orthodox Church, it is also condemned as a movement leading to confrontation among the various nationalities of the republic. At the same time, the situation among the Orthodox population itself is far from stable. Chuvash believers insist that Orthodoxy is not only a Russian belief, but also their own. More and more, parishioners demand that Chuvash priests be assigned and that the liturgy take place in the Chuvash language. A certain segment of the Orthodox Chuvash see the resolution of their national problems in the creation of a national Orthodox church, envisioned either as an autonomous diocese within the church or as an autocephalic church completely independent from Moscow and led by a Chuvash patriarch.

What are the prospects for the continued development and growth of the Chuvash national movement and its religion in the years to come? On the one hand, it would appear that the movement to revive traditional religion has peaked and that interest and activity have diminished in the past few years. Obstacles have emerged that place significant limits on the ability of national activists to draw large segments of the population toward their spiritual vision. One such obstacle can clearly be seen in the sphere of politics. Since his inauguration as President in 1994, Nikolai Fedorov has placed a clear priority on the maintenance of ethnic harmony within the Republic and good relations with the Federal

³⁰. Matveev B.G., “Ob etnichnosti i etnicheskikh zennostiah material’noi, duhovnoi i sozionormativnoi kul’tury,” *Problemy nazional’nogo v razvitiu chuvashskogo naroda*, pp.168-169; Salmin A.K. *Fol’k – religiia chuvashei*, p.

government in Moscow. To this end, he has distanced himself from the national movement and gone out of his way to show his support for the Russian Orthodox Church. Under Fedorov's administration, in fact, the Orthodox Church has thrived. A major campaign to build and restore churches has been launched resulting as of 1997 in the opening of as many as 140 churches and 4 monasteries.³¹ Islam has also made significant strides in Chuvashia in recent years. While the growth of Islam has centered mainly on the Republic's Tatar population, Islamic missionaries, often based in Turkey or Muslim republics of the former Soviet Union, have begun to focus their efforts on the Chuvash as well, drawing on a common Turkic heritage as part of their appeal.³²

Given the unfavorable political climate and the competition from two major world religions, it seems unlikely that the religious conceptions offered by national activists will gain broad acceptance. Here the situation in Chuvashia contrasts with the neighboring Marii-El republic, where the traditional pre-Christian religion was preserved to a much greater extent, and the revivalist efforts of national activists have met with a much more positive response. But if the national movement has had limited success in its efforts to construct an organized religion, its activities have had a much deeper impact in the creation of a national mythology. One need not be a fervent believer in the tenets of "*Sardash*" to accept the notion of traditional religion as an integral defining feature of the national heritage. The prominence of symbols and images from traditional Chuvash religion as defined by the national movement in secular festivals and events testifies to the continuing strength and vitality of the religion as an emblem of national identity. The power of traditional religion to embody the history, character and spiritual essence of the nation insures it a place as an enduring strain in contemporary Chuvash culture.

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³¹ . *Sovremennaia Chuvashiia*, (Cheboksary, 1997). p. 41.

³² . On the activities of Islamic missionaries in Chuvashia see "V Chuvashiiu Vakhkhabitov ne dopustili," *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, no. 214, Nov. 5, 1999.