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Unorthodox Orthodoxy? The Icon's Role in the Reception of Russian Orthodoxy by the Volga-Kama Chuvash

Abstract

This article discusses the icon's role as a visual, sensory, and material means of encounter with the sacred realm in the context of Russian Orthodox missions in the Volga-Kama region of Russia. It argues that the icon facilitated engagement with Russian Orthodox worldview and rites before the introduction of vernacular textual learning owing to its capacity to resonate with indigenous understandings of the sacred and divine. The article draws on prerevolutionary ethnographic texts describing the role played by icons in Chuvash religious rites and argues that, rather than the *dvoeverie* and paganism attributed to them by the missionaries, the Chuvash were by the early twentieth century practicing an indigenous, inculturated Orthodoxy.

Key words: Christian mission, Volga-Kama region, Chuvash, paganism, *dvoeverie*, vernacular religion, material culture

Introduction

Questions such as how and why religious faith, worldviews and rites have been mediated between different cultural contexts, as well as the impact of such mediation, have been pivotal issues in much recent historical, theological and anthropological scholarship. Scholars have grappled with complex questions concerning the nature of religious experience and conversion, a dilemma expressed well in Richard Fletcher's enquiry: "At what point may one say of an individual, or a society 'He (or she, or it) has become, is now Christian [or any other faith]'"?¹ Such questions revolve around the efficacy and reception of different media, textual and non-textual, used to arouse religious experience and teach faith in new cultural contexts. They also involve the correlation, overlap, and mutual influence of different religious worldviews and the ways they are embodied, lived out, and mediated through different aspects of human culture.

Regarding the Christian faith, which was actively propagated in imperial contexts during the two hundred years before the mid-twentieth century, historians have focused much attention on the broader cultural and social impact of Christian mission on indigenous cultures, worldviews and identities, often depicting missions as complicit in their destruction. Lamin Sanneh presents a more nuanced view arguing that, on the contrary, Christian mission has frequently led to “indigenous cultural revitalization” as “Christianity has sought indigenous coefficients and used them to propagate the Gospel.”² Such a view has arisen from the study of processes of indigenization and inculturation where the Christian faith has become embedded in local cultural particularity, passing “into all those distinctive ways of thought, those networks of kinship [. . .] that give the nation its commonality, its coherence, its identity.”³

While much of the recent historiography has been devoted to the mediation and reception of the Christian faith in the context of Western European empires, there has been a growing body of literature devoted to the cultural impact of Russian Orthodox missions on the indigenous, non-Slavic peoples of the Russian Empire.⁴ Such studies have also grappled with such issues as the missionary impact on the traditional religions, customs, rites and morals of indigenous peoples; the people, communities, methods, and media through which Orthodoxy was communicated; as well as wider processes of cultural and social change that both fostered and were ignited by the reception of the Orthodox Christian faith.

One region of the Russian Empire which has provided particularly fertile ground for considering these issues is the multi-cultural and multi-confessional Volga-Kama region.⁵ The western borders of this region, today represented by the republics of Mordovia, Chuvashia, and Mari-El, lie as little as 500 miles from Moscow and so the religious, cultural, and civil allegiances of its Turkic and Finno-Ugric inhabitants were of crucial significance for both the Russian state and church even before the Russian conquest of Kazan in 1552. Recent scholarly studies of the late nineteenth-century Orthodox missions which promoted the use of the vernacular mother tongues of these peoples have frequently disregarded the evidence that non-textual ways of mediating the Orthodox faith, among them the icon, had promoted the diffusion of Christian beliefs and rites from the sixteenth century, and possibly even earlier.

This article will focus on the icon as an agent in the processes of mediation and transition that appears to have readily resonated with indigenous coefficients. It argues that the icon facilitated engagement with the Russian Orthodox worldview and rites by the Mid-Volga’s indigenous inhabitants even before the introduction of vernacular textual learning about Orthodoxy. In the twentieth century, scholarly discourse about the reception and indigenization of Orthodoxy in new cultural milieus has been dominated by the Cyrillo-Methodian heritage with its emphasis on vernacular textual translation as the predominant means of cross-cultural communication of the Christian faith. Icons as a visual, sensory, and material means of encounter with the sacred realm, more transportable than church buildings and schools, challenge this focus on textual translation and literacy in the mediation of faith. The article will demonstrate how icons played a

significant role in spreading the Orthodox faith in a largely illiterate society scattered in isolated villages where the encounter with the divine and sacred was already expressed through visual and material forms.

Gabriel Hanganu argues that there is a great need to rethink the role of materiality in religious mediation more generally. He points out that recent anthropological scholarship emphasizes the importance of studying material aspects of religion in the context of practices associated with their production and consumption, thus complementing—and sometimes challenging—previous theological and art historical approaches.⁶ Vera Shevzov also sees the need for a shift from focusing exclusively on art historians' and theologians' interpretations of the icon, reminding us that the meaning of icons for individual believers and for the faith community at large has also stemmed from the story behind a particular icon and from believers' experiences associated with an icon.⁷

One obvious reason to focus on the role of the icon in the transmission of Orthodoxy in the Volga-Kama region is the large amount of space devoted to icons in pre-revolutionary ethnographic literature about its Turkic and Finno-Ugric peoples at a time when their religious culture was still perceived to be pagan. Such texts reveal that the Mid-Volga peoples shared a similar agrarian lifestyle with the Russians in nearby villages, or sometimes the same village, and so assimilated some of the popular Orthodox traditions associated with the annual agrarian and liturgical cycle. The indigenous population had trading contacts with Russians in towns and at fairs which were often held on Orthodox feast days associated with locally venerated saints and their icons. It is this kind of evidence relating to the role of the icon in the religious culture of the Chuvash, and to a lesser extent the Mari and Tatars, that will be explored in this article.

The article begins with a brief history of the encounter between the Russian Orthodox Church and the peoples of the Mid-Volga up to the beginning of the educational and missionary movement of the early nineteenth century, and continues with a discussion of the way that encounter has been portrayed in nineteenth-century, Soviet and post-Soviet scholarship. We shall see how the beliefs and ideologies of each generation of ethnographers and scholars have influenced their perceptions and how we need to be aware of their presuppositions as we read their texts.

The main body of the article contains nineteenth- and early twentieth-century ethnographic descriptions which enable us to see the role played by icons in Chuvash religious rites, even if sometimes through the distorted lens of the observer. We shall seek to become more aware of how and why the observers' lenses were frequently distorted and how this affects the description and interpretation of their observations. We shall also explore the reflections of some of the first indigenous Chuvash Orthodox priests on native perceptions of the icon, as well as their own understandings of the transformation of Chuvash religious identity at the turn of the twentieth century.

After exploring Chuvash practices and perceptions concerning the icon, we will broaden our focus to consider briefly the wider role played by icons in the reception of Orthodoxy by other non-Slavic peoples within the late Russian Empire and reflect on how this can contribute to a broader understanding of the icon's role in the mediation of Orthodoxy. In conclusion we shall raise questions about the nature of the icon itself: what is it about the nature of the icon that meant it was drawn into indigenous religious rites so easily?

Scholarly Discourse on the Encounter with Russian Orthodoxy in the Volga-Kama Region

From the tenth through thirteenth centuries the Volga-Kama region was dominated by a loose confederation of tribes known as Volga Bulgaria which was located around the confluence of the Volga and Kama rivers. After a mission was sent by the Caliph of Baghdad in 922 AD, ruling elites and town dwellers are believed to have adopted Islam whereas the forest-dwelling peoples continued to adhere to their indigenous animistic beliefs and rites, which nevertheless reflected contact with surrounding Muslim, Christian and Jewish peoples.⁸ After the conquest of the region by the Mongol-Tatars in the early thirteenth century and the creation of an independent Kazan Khanate in 1438, the Finno-Ugric Mari, Mordva and Udmurts and the Turkic Chuvash became tribute-paying peoples subordinate to the Kazan Tatars, whose Muslim faith left its imprint on local religious practices. There is nevertheless evidence of contact between the indigenous inhabitants and the Russian Church at this time. The Charter granting lands along the river Sura to the Spaso-Evfimiev monastery in Suzdal in 1393 speaks of Russians as well as *tutoshnikh starozhil'tsev* (the local indigenous inhabitants) who came to work the monastery lands.⁹ Abbot Makarii of the Monastery of the Yellow Waters Lake is also believed to have baptized some of the local non-Russian population in the early fifteenth century.¹⁰

Russians began moving into the Kozmodemiansk district of Kazan province, the most westerly district inhabited by Chuvash and Mari, in the first half of the sixteenth century when the local population submitted to Moscow in return for help against the Kazan Khanate. After Ivan the Terrible's conquest of Kazan in 1552, a series of fortified lines and Russian forts were founded more deeply into native lands in the seventeenth century. This helps to explain why, despite much aggressive resistance by the Mid-Volga peoples in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there were also small numbers who were baptized into Orthodoxy and began more peaceful collaboration with the Russian settlers, moving to work or protect the land alongside them.¹¹

If before 1740 only small numbers of the Mid-Volga peoples were baptized, between 1740 and 1764 almost 95 percent of them, apart from the Muslim Tatars, were drawn to Orthodox baptism through material incentives such as exemption from military conscription and taxes.¹² There was increasing construction of church buildings and the creation of Orthodox parishes so that by 1764, churches had been built in thirty-nine Chuvash villages of the Kazan diocese, and twenty-three villages of the Nizhnii Novgorod diocese.¹³ Although the first attempts at writing

instructive catechisms in local languages and educating indigenous clergy also date to this time,¹⁴ widespread use of native languages in village schools and parishes only began from the 1870s. Until that time, church services took place in Slavonic and the Russian priest was often considered to be a state official who rarely visited the village.

Scholars have generally portrayed an extremely negative picture of Russian missionary work in the Volga-Kama region in the eighteenth century, usually emphasizing the use of mission, along with outward measures of violence and coercion, as a means of russification and assimilation into the Russian state, which meant Orthodoxy remained outside the inner world of the indigenous inhabitants. They write of the mechanical fulfillment of obligations as the eighteenth-century conversions were neither voluntary nor sincere, and so adherence to Christianity was largely formal.¹⁵

It should be pointed out, however, that these historians have often relied on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century church historians who were defending the use of vernacular languages and texts in churches and schools at a time when such use was being questioned or even severely threatened.¹⁶ These prerevolutionary historians' criticism of the superficial Christian faith brought about by church and state policies in earlier times aimed to emphasize the great advances brought about through use of native languages, texts and personnel during the late Imperial period.

While there was undoubtedly much truth in the claims of these historians, their views, and those of post-perestroika historians who have relied on them, are based on the presupposition that textual learning, and especially vernacular textual learning, is the most effective, if not exclusive, means of communicating religious truth and arousing genuine religious faith and experience. They have consequently paid little attention to the ways that nondiscursive, experientially based knowledge of the sacred was being aroused, or it may be more accurate to say "discovered," among the Mid-Volga peoples before the onset of the vernacular-language educational movement.

Scholarly accounts of the history of the Mid-Volga peoples have also frequently been based on a presupposition closely related to that of the greater efficacy of textual learning: that there was a lack of overlap or correlation between Orthodox worldviews and the pre-Christian indigenous belief systems and rites of the Volga-Kama peoples. This assumption has led to perceptions of an absence of the "indigenous coefficients" to which Sanneh refers, on which the authentic inculturated reception of the Christian faith could be based. This assumption has, in its turn, arisen out of the concept of *dvoeverie* (dual or double faith), the perceived simultaneous practice of Christian and pagan rites, a concept which has permeated much prerevolutionary, Soviet, and post-Soviet study of religious rites and worldviews among both Russians and non-Russians. It is this framework of *dvoeverie* which has undergirded the discourse which divides the history of the Mid-Volga into a period of "superficial" adherence to Orthodoxy when paganism, superstitions, and idolatry persisted, followed by a period of more "genuine" Orthodoxy emerging as a result of the nineteenth-century vernacular educational movement.

The concept of *dvoeverie* arose out of the wider dilemma that ethnographers, missionaries and scholars faced in their conceptualization and description of the syncretic nature of native religious worldviews and rites after the initial contact with Orthodoxy.¹⁷ That this dilemma had surfaced already in the nineteenth century is seen in the writings of two of the most significant researchers into what was termed the Old Chuvash Faith in the 1870s, N.I. Zolotnitsky and V.K. Magnitsky, both sons of Russian priests in Chuvash villages. They pointed to mistaken information and attitudes due to lack of linguistic knowledge, especially among Orthodox priests who started from the presupposition that the Old Chuvash Faith was “devil worship” and then made distorted generalizations.

As sometimes on the lips of missionaries the shamanist views of the natives, together with their prayers and sacrificial offerings to the supreme Divinity and its ministering spirits, are summed up under the title “devil worship,” so in the writings of authors describing the lifestyle of the Chuvash and Cheremys the same is called “Kiremet worship.” [...] This depends partly on a lack of linguistic knowledge, partly on insufficient knowledge of the foundations of the “black faith.”¹⁸

It was partly to correct such mistaken research that Zolotnitsky and Magnitsky set themselves the task of “a scholarly restoration of the meaning and state of the Old Faith” and left ethnographic accounts which are considered valuable to this day.

While the terminology of paganism, superstition and idolatry was used to characterize the Old Chuvash Faith right up to the 1917 revolution, it was not the only interpretation. For example, the Kazan missionary and linguist Nikolai Ilminsky (1822–91), whose promotion of native vernaculars in schools and parishes led to the first generations of literate native teachers and Orthodox clergy among the Chuvash, wrote in 1865:

Viewing the natives from the psychological viewpoint, it is strange for me that some missionaries persecute with every available method [...] and try to destroy shamanistic beliefs and rites as if they were positively the work of the devil. In my opinion, these beliefs and rites are no more than the aspiration to the divine and mystical, deeply implanted in human nature by the Creator Himself, but interpreted by the childlike tribes in accordance with their simple, highly undeveloped concepts.¹⁹

Despite Ilminsky’s own texts at times using the terminology of paganism and *dvoeverie* to describe native religious practices, and his view of the natives as childlike and undeveloped, his relatively nonjudgmental view of indigenous culture and religious beliefs led him to advocate a policy of transforming traditional rites into more standard Orthodox rites, rather than simply annihilating them.²⁰

Scholars exploring the traditional Chuvash worldview and rites at the turn of the twenty-first

century have not only had to sift through nineteenth-century texts with their presuppositions and terminology but have also had to deal with the weight of Soviet ideology and terminology. Fletcher sums up the Marxist view of Christianity as “a kind of crust upon the surface of popular culture. Paganism went underground, subsided into [. . .] a *culture folklorique*, mute symbol of a downtrodden peasantry’s resentment against its oppressors.”²¹ This kind of viewpoint had two specific consequences in the Soviet era. One was a preoccupation with the persistence of traditional cultural forms or *perezhitki* (cultural survivals), which needed rooting out as obstacles on the road to modernization.²² P.V. Denisov’s 1959 book *Religioznye verovaniia chuvash* (Religious Beliefs of the Chuvash) expressed this late Soviet approach:

In the prerevolutionary period the backward peasantry, stupefied by the poison of religion, wasted a mass of time on celebrating various religious festivals. [. . .] Religious festivals, as all religion as a whole, have the same origin: they can be explained by causes rooted in false notions of nature in peoples’ consciousness and the feeling of the powerlessness of man before the might of the elements.²³

Another contradictory viewpoint arising from the Soviet banishing of Orthodoxy from historical and ethnographical studies was that a false model of folk culture was created which exaggerated the pagan elements in folk piety and remained silent about the Christian basis of many aspects of religious rites and worldviews.²⁴ Eve Levin commented that “The concept of *dvoeverie* demanded that scholars attempt to sort out what is pagan from what is Christian leaving no room for overlap between the two systems, or for the development of beliefs that draw on both pagan and Christian concepts.”²⁵

This latter viewpoint has persisted into much post-Soviet scholarship, including Chuvash scholarship, as is illustrated by A. Salmin’s 1994 monograph *Narodnaia obriadnost’ chuvashei* (Folk Rituals of the Chuvash), which enables us to see how these issues aroused not just scholarly discussions but agonizing existential dilemmas for the post-Soviet Chuvash intelligentsia raised on assumptions such as those expressed by Denisov above. Salmin writes of “the mass religiosity of the Chuvash intelligentsia aspiring to demonstrate at all costs their love for their national culture. [. . .] guilt feelings and awareness of the necessity to change value orientations give no peace. The dilemma is not the easiest—either we go back to the caves or come to ruin in the clutches of civilization.”²⁶

Despite Salmin’s desire to change value orientations, he reveals the continuing bias in his scholarship: “As regards the history of our question, we must have a particularly reverential attitude to the unbaptized Chuvash who were able to preserve and pass on to us the faith and rites of our distant ancestors at a time of social and religious oppression.”²⁷ We see in this viewpoint, and even more so in the content of his monograph, the presuppositions of the Soviet view of *dvoeverie* prevailing, that only among the unbaptized, non-Christian Chuvash had the true faith and rites of the distant ancestors been preserved. It is perhaps for this reason that Salmin sees only two equally unappealing solutions to his dilemma.

Salmin's approach also raises dilemmas for those seeking to use the nineteenth-century ethnographic material about the Chuvash to determine what were "the faith and rites of our distant ancestors." On the one hand the material was almost exclusively collected and written down by baptized Christian Chuvash or Russians, on the other hand the material reveals how intertwined Orthodox rites and beliefs were with purportedly pagan or traditional elements so that sorting out what is pagan from what is Christian is not only a hopeless task, but a task for which it is hard to find criteria for the sorting process.

In early twenty-first-century scholarship on the history of Russian Orthodoxy in the Mid-Volga region we see both a relaxing of the framework of *dvoeverie* alongside continuing attempts to conceptualize the religious rites and worldview of the Mid-Volga peoples after their encounter with Orthodoxy. The Chuvash historian Taimasov writes of the "deformation of worldviews [. . .] in which the traditional foundation of former beliefs had been preserved."²⁸ Determined to avoid the label of *dvoeverie*, he writes of *slaboverie* (weak faith), "oscillating Christians" who viewed themselves as Orthodox but preserved many elements of the traditional faith, and "Orthodox pagans" who bore the label "Orthodox" but were in fact still pagan.²⁹ Geraci writes of the Finno-Ugric tribes which "had practiced polytheistic tribal religions involving shamanism, ancestor worship and animal sacrifice," and considers that by the nineteenth century "native and Christian elements had often mixed together into an idiosyncratic mélange."³⁰ Paul Werth writes of how "among both Russians and non-Russians, popular or 'lived' Orthodoxy was characterized by deviation from officially prescribed Orthodoxy" and he expresses views closest to those of Ilminsky and Sanneh when he describes how, by the early twentieth century, some of the baptized Tatars had "constructed an indigenous Orthodox Christian identity."³¹

This change in attitude in recent scholarship has taken place against a broader concern to expose the "academic myth" of *dvoeverie* by such scholars as Stella Rock who argues that it is "a historiographical construct that developed in the nineteenth century out of a preoccupation with the 'folk' and a belief that by sifting through the sediment of traditional culture one can find preserved pure elements of pre-Christian paganism."³² It is highly significant that she identifies the first modern use of the term *dvoeverie* in the journal of the Theological Academy in Kazan in 1861. This was the very decade which witnessed the emergence of the vernacular missionary movement and the accompanying rise in ethnographic studies of remnants of paganism in the Mid-Volga region, thus supporting Rock's argument that popular practices have been conceived of as pagan by reforming clerics and those involved in educational movements which have promoted cognitive Orthodoxy and rejected the magical, miraculous, or supernatural.³³ We shall see further evidence of this correlation of educational movements and the terminology of paganism and *dvoeverie* later in the article.

These scholars' discussions revolve around the pivotal issue of whether the traditional, pre-Christian worldviews and rites of the peoples of the Russian Empire were something entirely distinct from the Christian faith, as the term *dvoeverie* suggests, or whether there were coefficients, com-

mon aspirations to and understandings of the divine which enabled genuine engagement with and indigenization of the new faith. Were there, in the words of S.A. Mousalimas, “vital characteristics within their own ancestral cultures that corresponded to and could engage with the Russian Orthodox faith and practices” so that the transition to Orthodoxy could be both indigenous and corporate?³⁴

It is in order to answer questions such as these that we shall now examine ethnographic accounts about the Chuvash from the 1840s to the early twentieth century in order to ascertain what light the icon’s role in Chuvash practices can shed on the issue of Chuvash religious identity. Reliable ethnographic material about the Chuvash is sparse before the 1840s–50s and yet the first native Chuvash collectors of ethnographic material from that time make us aware of the role the icon already played in Chuvash religious culture by then. It is to these accounts that we will first turn, before continuing with an analysis of attitudes to Chuvash religious identity in the early nineteenth-century texts and the legacy of this period for future scholarship.

Practices and Perceptions Concerning the Icon in Chuvash History and Culture

In 1583, a wooden fortress was built on a promontory jutting out into the river Volga at Kozmodemiansk, as well as a watch-point six kilometers to the east in the direction of Kazan, at the village of Vladimirskoe-Basurmanovo where Chuvash and Mari soldiers loyal to the Russian Tsar were housed. The village was named after the icon of the Vladimir Mother of God brought to the Kozmodemiansk fort in 1587 to protect the town from attack. By the time of Spiridon Mikhailov, a native Chuvash who wrote ethnographic accounts of the Chuvash and Mari published in the *Kazanskie gubernskie vedomosti* (Kazan Provincial News) in the 1850s,³⁵ the Vladimir icon had acquired the status of a miracle-working icon. A procession with the icon in 1654 had led to the end of an outbreak of plague, the icon alone had been saved when the church had been burnt down by the Mari around 1690, and nine other miracles had been recorded between 1765 and 1839. After 1847, the icon was taken annually on procession around nearby Chuvash and Mari villages after a cholera epidemic. By the 1870s the icon was brought to Kozmodemiansk for ten days every June before the feast of the Vladimir icon (June 23/July 6) when many pilgrims came not only from adjacent villages but also from the nearby Nizhnii-Novgorod province. Pilgrims often went on to venerate the Tikhvin icon in the Chuvash town of Tsivilsk on its feast day (June 26/July 9), sometimes calling in at the Chuvash village of Ishaki to venerate the icon of Saint Nicholas on the way.³⁶

The name of the Tikhvin monastery in Tsivilsk is a reminder of how it was founded in the midst of conflict and resistance in the seventeenth century. An icon of the Tikhvin Mother of God had appeared to a local widow when Stenka Razin’s Cossacks, together with local Chuvash and Mari, besieged the town in October 1671 (fig 1). According to local tradition, the town was miraculously saved when, after a two-week siege, the insurgents went blind and began fighting among themselves. This was attributed to the intercession of the Mother of God and the monastery was built in 1675 to house the icon and to serve as a refuge from further attacks.³⁷



Fig. 1 Icon of the Tikhvin Mother of God from the Tsvil'sk women's monastery, Tsvil'sk, Chuvashia, seventeenth century (image from A.I. Mordvinova, *Tserkovnoe iskusstvo Chuvashii* [Cheboksary: Chuvashskoe Knizhnoe Izdatel'stvo, 2012])

Further east along the bank of the Volga from Vladimirskoe, a chapel was built and dedicated to Saint Elijah. An eight-pointed cross brought there in 1695 soon attracted the veneration of both Chuvash and Russians so that in 1720 the chapel became the Ilinskaia Pustyn, a hermitage of the Spaso-Iunga monastery founded in 1625 a short distance inland from Kozmodemiansk.³⁸

The village of Pokrovskoe, upstream from Kozmodemiansk, was settled in the sixteenth century by Russian peasants who belonged to the Archbishops of Suzdal. Many of the inhabitants worked in the center of Russia but would be given holiday time after the harvest at the feast of Pokrov (the feast of the Protecting Veil of the Mother of God on October 1/14) when they would return to the village, often taking with them their wares for sale. A Pokrov fair had therefore developed in the village and Mikhailov commented on the influence of such fairs on the local non-Russian population:

The Pokrov fair brings the significant benefit that, through it, the natives, coming into contact with Russians, adopt their ways and customs. [. . .] The Mountain Mari³⁹ of many nearby villages, observing such Russian habits, have adopted them themselves and instead of the former, semi-savage rites after the threshing of the grain, have begun to celebrate the feast of Pokrov in the same way as the inhabitants of Pokrovskoe.⁴⁰

Evidence of the significance that the icon had already acquired in Chuvash religious culture by the early nineteenth century also comes from Mikhailov's descriptions of the beginnings of veneration of the icons of Saint Nicholas in the Chuvash villages of Ishaki and Chemeievo. While the above villages of Vladimirskoe and Pokrovskoe were on the banks of the Volga in territories inhabited by Russians, Ishaki and Chemeievo were located more deeply in native territory. In the 1850s there were six hundred Chuvash inhabitants of Ishaki, as well as twenty-five Russians who were all from one family of russified Chuvash. The fear aroused when a Russian priest and deacon

moved to the village in 1746 and occupied four households near the flour mill is revealed in the fact that, “with the settlement of Christian clergy, the original inhabitants, Chuvash who do not love an influx of unknown people, moved away to the other side of the gully and formed a separate hamlet, Kiudiuk-Sirma.”⁴¹

This fear appears to have been gradually overcome after a black stone icon with Saint Nicholas on one side and the Archangel Michael and Saint Basil the Great on the reverse “appeared” to a baptized Chuvash as he was ploughing in 1751 (fig. 2). The son of the Cheboksary merchant Mikulin who owned the Ishaki flour mill gave the money to build a stone church in honor of the icon and many Russian pilgrims began to visit the parish. When the village, apart from the church, was destroyed by fire in 1793, repair work was carried out and pilgrims gave gifts to have icons portraying the history of the Old and New Testaments painted on the inner walls of the church. An iron foundry and a sawmill were set up, improving prospects of employment for the villagers who had previously worked as barge-haulers on the Volga.



Fig. 2 Stone icon of Saint Nicholas from Ishaki, fourteenth century, slate, 5 x 4 cm (image from A.I. Mordvinova, *Tserkovnoe iskusstvo Chuvashii* [Cheboksary: Chuvashskoe Knizhnoe Izdatel'stvo, 2012])

Increased economic activity in the village led to a three-day fair being held around Saint Nicholas' spring feast day (May 9/22). When Mikhailov visited in the 1840s–50s, between 3000 and 4000 pilgrims and traders descended on the village at this time every year, while there would be a daily stream of pilgrims throughout the year who venerated a large wooden cross in a chapel built on the site of the spring where the Ishaki icon was found. Mikhailov noted that such pilgrimage was more a feature of Chuvash religious practice than visiting the local parish church, concluding: “It can be said without exaggeration that Ishaki in the eyes of the native people, especially the Chuvash, is a ‘metropolis’ in the direct sense of the word,⁴² and they come here to pray more than to their parish churches.”⁴³

A similar icon of Saint Nicholas with Saints Boris and Gleb on the reverse had been discovered in 1777 in the nearby village of Chemeievo after the local clergy had been brutally killed by the Chuvash during the Pugachev revolt. A small chapel had been built at the site of the icon's appearance and many Chuvash came to venerate the icon, with a special influx of pilgrims and Chuvash and Russian traders for a one-day fair on the spring feast of Saint Nicholas. Mikhailov

regretted that a more spacious chapel had not been built as “a religious procession (*krestnyi khod*) could be established from Chemeievo with intercessory prayer services (*molebstviia*) instead of that superstitious celebration carried out at *Semik* by the Chuvash in the field.”⁴⁴

Semik was the popular Russian name for the Sunday of Pentecost/Trinity⁴⁵ which is preceded by Memorial Saturday when special prayers for the dead are held. In the Chuvash annual cycle there were four times of rites for the dead, *khyvni*, when food would be prepared, and the bath-house would be heated for the spirits of the ancestors who were believed to come out of their graves and visit their families. One of these was the Thursday before Pentecost, known among the Chuvash as *Shimek*. The departed were believed to frequent relatives’ homes during the following week and so the Chuvash planted trees by their windows for them to sit on and relatives gathered for communal meals until the Thursday after Pentecost, *Lesser Shimek*, when the departed were accompanied back to the cemetery.⁴⁶

Mikhailov’s understanding that Orthodox rites with icons could replace the Chuvash non-standard “superstitious celebration” at *Shimek*, as well as his encouragement of preaching and education in local vernaculars, was shared by those becoming more actively involved in Orthodox missionary work in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Mikhailov makes us aware of this new wave of missionary work when he comments that it was not just the icons which were drawing the Chuvash to Ishaki and Chemeievo and transforming the old ways, but also the preaching in the native Chuvash language. He wrote of Ishaki that “Here there have been, and there are now, worthy pastors to evangelize the native people, preaching the true God in the native Chuvash language.” He dreamt that parish schools would be set up in Ishaki and Chemeievo precisely because the natives came here on pilgrimage to the icons. “I know that Chuvash children in similar parishes study better than in ordinary villages.”⁴⁷

We shall now turn to examine the impact of the educational and missionary movement from the 1830s–40s on Chuvash religious practices themselves, but also more significantly on the way their rites and worldviews were perceived. The texts make us aware that the Orthodox missionaries, and not just ordinary believers such as Spiridon Mikhailov mentioned above, realized the capacity of the icon to resonate with indigenous coefficients and so emphasized the role of the icon in the missionary process.

The Icon and Perceptions of Chuvash Identity Amidst the Nineteenth-century Educational and Missionary Movement

In 1827, concern over more frequent cases of the practice of non-Christian rites among the Mari of Viatka province led Archbishop Filaret of Kazan⁴⁸ and Bishop Kirill of Viatka⁴⁹ to draw up “Rules for teaching and affirming the Newly-Baptized in the Christian faith”⁵⁰ to provide guidance for the clergy of their dioceses. These rules emphasized that clergy should know local languages, while the Epistle, Gospel, Creed, Lord’s Prayer, and sermons for Sundays and feast

days should be read in local vernacular languages during the Liturgy. Filaret's letters and reports also show that he was convinced that Orthodox rites with icons should be emphasized as a means of replacing traditional rites. In an 1829 letter to Bishop Kirill he wrote:

I have instructed the priests to act in the following way: that instead of their superstitious rites, they should try in every way possible to teach them the sacred, sanctifying and instructive rites of our Church, and even, where possible, not to change either the time or the place of these sacred rites. For example, they make sacrifices at the beginning of sowing. Why should a priest not hold intercessory prayers (moleben) with the holy icons in the open field and so on?⁵¹

Filaret's recommendation helps to explain the increasing number of accounts of intercessory prayers with icons being used to replace traditional rites as the nineteenth century progressed. Fr. Viktor Vishnevsky,⁵² the son of a russified Chuvash Orthodox priest, was one of those charged with implementing Filaret's proposals. In an 1844 report, *O religioznykh pover'iakh chuvash* (On the Religious Beliefs of the Chuvash), compiled after visiting sixty Chuvash parishes, he reproached priests for not going on processions with icons in the fields after the harvest and during drought, which meant the Chuvash continued their own rites.⁵³

Despite Vishnevsky sharing Archbishop Filaret and Mikhailov's view of the Chuvash rites as idolatrous and pagan superstitions, his writings about Chuvash religious practices enable us to see how the Chuvash had, by this time, appropriated to some extent Orthodox feast days and saints and the agrarian practices associated with them, while using the terminology of their own religious culture to describe them. The baptized Chuvash had told him that "the Chuvash recognize twelve good beings subordinate to the Almighty, as the Savior had twelve apostles, that their *Pulekhse* is the same as the Archangel Michael for Christians, that *Mun ira* is the Guardian Angel, *Pikhambar* is Saint George on whose feast day the farm animals are let out to pasture for the first time, *Kherle sir* is Saint Nicholas near whose spring feast day the spring sowing ends..."⁵⁴ The final sentence of this text contributes to our understanding of why the icon of Saint Nicholas had come to be particularly venerated among the Chuvash, as religious rites connected with the spring sowing had previously played a very important role in their agrarian cycle.

Vishnevsky also contributed to satisfying Archbishop Filaret and Mikhailov's desire to make Orthodox teaching more accessible to the Chuvash, by translating Metropolitan Filaret of Moscow's Short Catechism⁵⁵ into Chuvash in 1832 and compiling a textbook with a Chuvash grammar and dictionary for teaching the Chuvash language in church schools.⁵⁶ These efforts to promote vernacular education and preaching among the Chuvash were part of what Gregory Freeze identifies as a broader process of "inner mission" taking place throughout Russia between 1750 and 1850, which was oriented chiefly toward the more verbal forms of preaching and catechism. The aim was to implant a more conscious, cognitive Orthodoxy among the common folk, and consequently such missionary efforts were accompanied by a very critical view of popular religion which was frequently labeled as superstition and idolatry and evidence of the "superficiality" of the Orthodox faith of the Russian people themselves.⁵⁷

Although the Chuvash had only recently been baptized and so were the objects of what could be termed “initial mission” rather than “inner mission,” this promotion of preaching and catechism to foster cognitive Orthodoxy was as much a hallmark of the 1830s–40s missions in the Mid-Volga as was the icon, as we have seen above. And the tendency to accompany missionary efforts with a critical view of popular religion can also be observed. Fr. Viktor Vishnevsky described the Chuvash rites as paganism and “an empty and seducing fabrication of your shamans,” while Spiridon Mikhailov interlaced his pleas for schools among the Chuvash with descriptions of what he termed their “semi-savage rites” or “superstitions” as in his above description of *semik*.

While this kind of language continued into later ethnographic accounts, there were those, such as the Kazan University lecturer Vasilii Sboev, who began to question this terminology even in the 1850s. Sboev grew up in a priest’s home in a Chuvash village, spoke the Chuvash language⁵⁸ and participated in the autumnal Chuvash rites of *chuklene* as a boy in the 1820s. He has left us a description of these rites which took place after the harvest, and which Mikhailov refers to as “the former, semi-savage rites after the threshing of the grain.” The word *chuk* referred to a sacrificial offering accompanied by prayers, the central feature in the rites which had traditionally taken place in the tenth month, *chuk-oiykh* (month of sacrifice). The new grain, in the form of bread and beer, was placed on the table and prayers of thanksgiving asking the supreme God, *Tora*, for future abundance and protection of the harvest were said. According to Sboev:

Orgies were then part of the rite; thanksgiving was made to many pagan divinities.[...] It was the *iomzi*⁵⁹ (Chuvash folk healer) who said the thanksgiving prayers to the supreme god, to the mother of the gods, to god the creator of the world, to god the creator of souls, to the god of the sun, to the goddess of the sun, to the god of the moon, to god who reveals himself in prophetic visions [...] in conclusion the Chuvash turned to the icon, fixing a wax candle to it. All those present made the sign of the cross and bowed before the icon while the *iomzi* declared: Russian God! Save and have mercy, Mother of God, save and have mercy! Angel of God! Save and have mercy! God Nikolai! Save and have mercy!⁶⁰

Sboev continues by comparing the rites as he experienced them in the 1820s with his current experience of them in the 1840s. He comments that such rites are comparable to Russian rites of praying over and making the sign of the cross over any first fruits before eating them for the first time and he is adamant that they are no longer pagan. “They celebrate in a similar way the completion of any important task [...] in the prayers and invocations themselves used at *chuklene* there are no noticeable traces of paganism.”⁶¹

What is particularly significant for us in Sboev’s 1820s account is that, even though he was trying to emphasize that the rites were in their former pagan form, the icon played an important role. If the Chuvash “turned” to the icon in conclusion it was because the main thanksgiving prayers

were said in the direction of the door of the house which was always built facing east, whereas the icons would have been in the corner opposite the door.

N.I. Zolotnitsky's description of *chukleme* in Iadrin district in the 1870s also tells us that after the main prayers the master of ceremonies would turn to the icon and pray "God have mercy! Do not abandon us! God in the corner! [i.e. the icon] save us from all evil!" And three cups of beer would be drunk. He would then turn to the men and say on behalf of the householder: "Up to now we have eaten and drunk but not remembered the Mother of God: he proposes from the bottom of his heart to drink a cup to Her name; are you in agreement"? The men would agree and then he would ask the same of the women. After their agreement he would say: "This is the cup of the Mother of God. May the fields have boundaries and meadows have limits [i.e. be protected from harmful, outside influence], may the waters be navigable and the barley so heavy that a horse cannot carry it and the hops so that a man cannot lift them."⁶²

Many Chuvash traditional rites took place at the boundaries of fields or villages, or at crossroads, as these were considered particularly sacred locations. Such rites frequently involved the casting out of evil or requests for protection from evil coming from the outside.⁶³ This may explain why prayers to the Mother of God had been drawn into the rites of *chukleme* and that, as we learnt from Mikhailov above, the Chuvash had even started to celebrate Pokrov, a feast which revolves around prayers for the Mother of God's protection from evil, instead of their traditional autumnal rites.⁶⁴ There is also evidence that Pokrov was not the only autumnal Marian feast day which had resonated with indigenous coefficients and become entwined with Chuvash rites of thanksgiving and prayers for the harvest to be kept free from harm and evil.

Magnitsky's 1881 list of Orthodox feast days, which the Chuvash knew well, includes both *Pokrov* (Pokrov) and *Kerkhi Kasanski* (the autumn feast of the Kazan Mother of God icon on October 21/November 4) which is celebrated three weeks after Pokrov and so is closer to the traditional time of holding *chukleme* in *chuk-oiukh*. A report from the Chuvash parish of Proleika, Samara province in 1899 informs us that the local Chuvash had attached the rites of *chukleme* to the feast of the Kazan icon, which was their patronal feast, rather than to Pokrov. One of the first native Chuvash priests, Fr. Daniil Filimonov, tells us that when he went with the festal icon to parishioners' homes to serve a *moleben*, one woman asked him, "Batiushka, can we carry out sacrifice with the new grain and beer? We formerly did this at the feast of the Kazan Icon." To which Fr. Filimonov replied that "to make sacrifice is a great sin and not only does God not accept such prayers, but he is angry with them."⁶⁵

Although Sboev's above description of *chukleme* in the 1820s speaks of prayers to "pagan divinities," he then continues to tell us that the prayer was addressed to the supreme God whom the Chuvash knew as *Tora*. In Sboev's list of other "gods" to whom the Chuvash prayed, there is a strong emphasis on knowledge of a Creator God who reveals himself to humankind through dreams. Magnitsky's description of *chukleme* published in 1881 gives an even more detailed

description of sixty-one “gods” to whom prayers were addressed including Tora, *Tor amysh* (God’s mother), the Giver of children, the One who gives fertility to the grain and makes it sway, the Giver of domestic animals, the Giver of bees, the strength of the wind, the father, mother, ears, wings and legs of the Sun, the One who gives life as an inheritance and gives prohibitions.⁶⁶

While such lists of Chuvash “gods” led many nineteenth-century commentators to describe the Chuvash traditional faith as pagan or polytheistic,⁶⁷ the above lists also suggest that the Chuvash at this time were monotheistic but with a strong sense of the sacred and divine manifested in all aspects of the natural world. Both views were expressed by native Chuvash Orthodox priests of the late nineteenth century who were trying to explain indigenous understandings of the icon and in the process sought to clarify Chuvash understandings of the divine.

The Chuvash Traditional Pantheon and Indigenous Perceptions of the Icon

One of these priests was the abovementioned Fr. Filimonov who in a report written in 1896, when he wanted to open an icon-painting workshop at Ishaki school, wrote of the extremely reverent attitude towards icons of his fellow villagers when he was a boy in the 1860s.

Not all will paint icons: only those who wish are capable and godly. Sinful icon painters in Chuvash villages could offend the religious feeling of their fellow Chuvash who, despite their lack of development concerning Christianity, have particular ideas about icons [...]. When I was small and lived at home, I heard from my fellow villagers that holy images are painted by righteous people.⁶⁸

Filimonov, an educated schoolteacher and priest, emphasizes here that despite the Chuvash “lack of development concerning Christianity,” which we can take to mean their lack of the kind of cognitive understanding of Christian teachings provided by the schools that Filimonov actively promoted, they nevertheless had great reverence and experiential understanding of the holiness of the icon. In an 1890 report from his Chuvash parish of Musirma, Filimonov makes the same point that the Chuvash had a reverential attitude towards the holiness of the icon even if they had not received “correct” Orthodox teaching about the icon and had filtered the teaching they had received through their indigenous religious conceptions.

Seeing how Russians venerate holy icons the Chuvash themselves began to have a reverential attitude to religious objects venerated by Russians. The Chuvash were taught then (and unfortunately even now some teach) that each icon is *Tura* i.e. God. In the end the Chuvash acquired a false impression of icons as of Russian or church gods. The Chuvash native understanding of God and of their relationship to Him remained as before—pagan. True Orthodox teaching about God, the Mother of God, angels, saints and icons and their veneration was not assimilated by the Chuvash. As a result, in their heads they transferred their basic pagan view onto Christian holy objects; accepting Christianity as the Russian faith, they understood it in their own way, and acquired the same attitude

towards icons and churches as they had towards their *kiremets*, as earthly, evil, secondary divinities. The only difference was they began to relate to icons as Russian divinities and not as their own Chuvash divinities.⁶⁹

Although Filimonov interprets Chuvash experience of the icon through the prism of *dvoeverie*, and this leads him to make a fundamental dichotomy between the Chuvash “pagan” worldview and “true Orthodox teaching,” a crucial point in this text is that he considers that the Chuvash had been able to transfer their basic religious worldview onto Christian holy objects and therefore understand the icon “in their own way.” Despite the unhelpful teaching Filimonov describes, which had presumably been given by Russian priests struggling to express Orthodox teaching in the Chuvash language and had led to misunderstandings and unhelpful terminology, the Chuvash would appear to have grasped something of the holiness of the saints depicted on icons and acquired a reverential attitude to them. According to Filimonov, this was the same attitude as they had towards the *kiremets*, the sacred groves which were their own places of encounter with the divine. Although Filimonov claims that the Chuvash associated the *kiremet* with “earthly, evil, secondary divinities,” he is being forced by his framework of *dvoeverie* to contradict himself. He tells us that the Chuvash had transferred their attitude to the *kiremet* onto icons and churches and stresses in both above passages that the Chuvash had a reverential attitude towards the icon, thereby implying that the Chuvash reverence for the sacred location of the icon was a continuation of their reverence for the sacred location of the *kiremet*. Vasilii Sboev maintained that the association of the *kiremet* with evil was the result of Orthodox missionaries labeling the Old Chuvash Faith as devil worship, and that the original native understanding had associated *kiremets* with both good and evil.

Another of the first native Chuvash Orthodox priests, Fr. Aleksei Rekeev, also discussed the Chuvash use of the word “god” to speak of icons in a more general discussion of Chuvash understandings of the sacred and whether the Chuvash were polytheists as some nineteenth-century ethnographers and missionaries claimed. He criticizes Sboev and Zolotnitsky for writing superficially and concluding that the Chuvash are polytheists, “as they see the divinity in all things [. . .]. In the thinking of the Chuvash God is only one, *Tura* or *Asla Tura*, Great God, and they never confuse him with the *kiremet*. In Scripture there are different names for God and the Chuvash have the same.”⁷⁰ According to Rekeev, there are other good spiritual beings which the Chuvash call God, but he feels the Chuvash have got confused, just as for Russian peasants Zosima and Savvatii are the patron saints of bees and the village people call them *pchelinye bogi* (bee gods). “The Chuvash themselves cannot explain why they *call* these beings gods but maintain that they are *not* gods. [. . .] You can see that the Chuvash presuppose that there are various spiritual beings in the world with different names, just as the Russians believe in the existence of invisible, unclean powers.”⁷¹

It could be argued that Rekeev was writing at the very end of the nineteenth century (1896) when the Chuvash worldview had been strongly influenced by the monotheistic worldview of

their Orthodox and Muslim neighbors, or that as an Orthodox priest he was seeking to emphasize the similarities between the traditional Chuvash and the Orthodox worldviews. Yet Rekeev's text is significant as he has shaken off the prism of *dvoeverie* and the terminology of paganism and argues that there is actually an overlap between the Chuvash seeing the divinity in all things and acknowledging the presence of numerous spiritual beings in the material and immaterial realms, and the Orthodox belief in the existence of invisible powers and patron saints who protect different aspects of human life and earthly activity such as beekeeping. He also makes us aware that in their reception of Orthodoxy the Chuvash had not only had to contend with receiving Orthodox teaching from those who often had an inadequate command of their language, as Filimonov informs us. The Orthodox faith was as much transmitted through the worldview, terminology and experiential devotion of the Russian peasant and so did not always correspond to the catechisms and theological textbooks as much as the missionaries and first native Orthodox priests such as Filimonov would have liked.

The discussions of these first native Chuvash Orthodox priests provide us with keys to reading the more abundant ethnographic texts of the late nineteenth century, which make clear how the icon had been drawn in multiple ways into Chuvash rites connected with healing, remembrance of the dead, and the annual agricultural cycle, owing to the icon's capacity to resonate with indigenous coefficients and conceptions of the sacred. Yet at the same time, the language used to describe icons and the saints they depict, such as "gods" or *Tora*, makes us aware of why outsiders, and even insiders such as Filimonov, continued to describe them as pagans and polytheists.

The Icon in Chuvash Practices in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

There are many texts which reveal how, by the late nineteenth century, the icon played a significant role in Chuvash practices related to healing. When a Chuvash fell ill, the *iomzi* would discover by divination which god had been angered. Bread, wax, water, and icons were used in this process. The names of gods would be listed and if a piece of bread on a thread moved in a certain way when a god was named, the *iomzi* knew he or she was angry. "Usually divination was carried out using all the gods not excluding the domestic god, i.e., the saint whose face was depicted on the icon in the home of the sick person."⁷² The *iomzi* would send a relative to place candles in the local church. "The *iomzi* indicates before which icon to put candles. The Chuvash have many gods and the *iomzi* knows which church icon corresponds to which Chuvash god."⁷³

When Chuvash gathered to remember the departed on Thursday or Friday evening for six weeks after their death, each would put up a candle before the icons, or on the wall near the door of the house, then break off a piece of each kind of food, and pour wine saying, "May this be before (name of the departed)!" We see here the two opposing sacred locations of the icon-corner and the door of the house, as we have seen in the rites of *chukleme*. Those who received a large inheritance from a departed relative would take his or her icons into their home "and in this way, as it

were, replace the departed and take on themselves the duties of the departed towards the god of the home and the ancestors.”⁷⁴

Il'in den' (Prophet Elijah's Day on July 20/August 2) was known among the Russians by such names as *Gromoverzhets* (Thunderer) or *Gromoboi* (Thunder clap), partly due to Elijah's connection with rain, but also as his feast falls at the time stormy weather sets in at the end of the summer. With the strong Chuvash sense of the influence of the powers and spirits of nature over human life, thunder was particularly feared by them. They took a sacred rowan branch in hand at the sound of thunder to frighten away the evil spirit they believed was being chased away by the thunder god.⁷⁵ One of the Chuvash divinities was *Asla-ati* (Great Father), the spirit controlling thunder. Fr. Aleksei Rekeev tells us: “This spirit replaces for the Chuvash the Russian prophet Elijah, as he is imagined in popular beliefs.”⁷⁶ According to G. Komissarov, Prophet Elijah's day was known to every Chuvash,⁷⁷ there was a prohibition on work, and a foal was sacrificed.⁷⁸

Fr. Viktor Zaikov relates how he made use of Chuvash reverence for this day during a procession with icons and intercessory prayers in the fields on this feast in 1887. He preached a sermon to the villagers of Polevaia Shentakhova about observing Sunday rather than Friday, which at first they agreed to do, but then refused under the influence of a wealthy Chuvash who refused to come to the village assembly on the matter. “I was forced to go to his home myself and [. . .] having made him listen to reason, I returned with him to the people. Then after [. . .] telling them the story of Elijah the prophet and his sacrifices and comparing them [the Chuvash] with the Israelite people, I managed to persuade them to stop observing Friday.”⁷⁹

Similar incidents unrelated to Prophet Elijah's Day took place when the inhabitants of thirty villages in the Tsivilsk district went to carry out traditional sacrifices near a sacred lake due to poor crops in 1889. The new native priest served the Liturgy, then gathered all the faithful Orthodox and went with an icon procession to the place of sacrifice. He held a prayer service and then tried to prove to the gathered Chuvash the uselessness of blood sacrifice, causing an angry uproar.⁸⁰

When Fr. Grigorii Filippov arrived in the parish of Bichurino in May 1890 he was asked to go on procession with icons to the fields due to drought, although in only one village did many Chuvash take part. After he had carried out catechetical talks with the help of school pupils, the Chuvash agreed more readily to have their homes blessed with icons and holy water, and he blessed the rye before the spring sowing.⁸¹

Chuvash Pilgrimage Practices and the Ishaki Icon of Saint Nicholas

Accounts of the pilgrimage to the icon of Saint Nicholas in Ishaki continue to be a marked feature of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writings about the Chuvash. According to these texts the Chuvash were prompted to set off for Ishaki for a variety of reasons. In the 1870s in Iadrin district, after the spring sowing, beer was brewed in honor of the Sorma *kiremet*,⁸² then

prayers and offerings were held in the fields, after which one member of the community was selected to set off to venerate the icon of Saint Nicholas at Ishaki⁸³ (see fig. 2). Fr. N. Arkhangel'sky wrote in 1899 that when someone fell ill, blood sacrifices were made, but if there was no improvement "the *iomzi* would in the end advise someone in the family to go to [...] Ishaki to pray to Saint Nicholas and put up as many candles as the *iomzi* said." He nevertheless added, "it is already rare that the *iomzi* recommends sacrifices. Now they usually advise [...] either to go to Ishaki [...] or to put up candles to the icon of the Savior in the parish church."⁸⁴

N. Ostroumov, describing the rites connected with illness among the Chuvash in general in 1876, says that after the *iomzi* by means of divination had discovered which god had been angered, they would send a relative to put up two candles before an icon corresponding to the Chuvash god in the parish church. A third candle was broken into pieces according to the number of chapels along the way home, where they were left so that the small chapel gods would ask for healing before the god where the main candle had been put. In cases of serious illness, the *iomzi* would order candles to be put in especially sacred places, at crossroads, on bridges and sacred trees, or before a wonderworking icon such as that at Ishaki.⁸⁵ In Musirma, Tsivil'sk district in the 1880s,

If someone falls ill they go on pilgrimage to Ishaki and on the way back call in at Tsivil'sk monastery, Bagildino and Kovali as the Musirma parishioners say that the old God lives in Kovali.⁸⁶ From the Kovali church they set off for their own parish church and put up candles there. The order of visiting churches is not infringed. When someone in the family goes to Ishaki, those at home do not put up candles before the icons at home before he has returned and been in the parish church.⁸⁷

The Musirma parish was formed in 1882 from villages which formerly belonged to Kovali parish and their calling in to the "old God" was a traditional practice which they had drawn into their Orthodox pilgrimage routes. According to Fr. Aleksei Rekeev, when Chuvash moved to live in a new location, they believed that the *kiremet* spirit stayed in the old location and the Chuvash continued to pray to it from afar, "but sometimes the *kiremet* in the old place is not satisfied with worship from afar and requires that those who have moved come to it and worship in person—then the Chuvash have to go on pilgrimage whether they like it or not."⁸⁸

V.K. Magnitsky wrote in 1877 that Ishaki was visited even by unbaptized Chuvash and Chermys,⁸⁹ and P. Mike, describing Tsivil'sk district in 1898, wrote that it was above all the pagan Chuvash, or the baptized not yet affected by the educational movement, who called Saint Nicholas "Nikola-god" and went to put up candles in Ishaki on the advice of the *iomzi*.⁹⁰

The pilgrim would often set out with precise instructions from the *iomzi* as to how many candles to put before which icons.⁹¹ According to Mike, they would wrap up the promised offering, often a 25-kopec coin, and put it in a place where nobody would notice.⁹² The way candles and coins were used as offerings in Chuvash practices is illustrated by a *kiremet* near Shumatovo in Iadrin district where, until the 1850s, an elm tree, had stood known as Priests' Elm. The Orthodox cler-

gy from Shumatovo had been hanged there during Pugachev's revolt. Nearby stood another oak where the bodies of a further thirty-two people hanged by Pugachev had been buried. When M. Vasiliev wrote his account in 1904, the trees had long since been cut down and the oak replaced by a chapel, "but the people know well the places where they stood and throw wax candles and copper coins at the tree stumps."⁹³ That the Chuvash wrapped up the coin and put it in a secret place was probably related to their practice of hanging coins in a pouch or cloth⁹⁴ in an outhouse or barn. A description emphasizing how Christianized the Chuvash were by 1910 says the coin was put before the domestic icons rather than in a secret place.⁹⁵

The pilgrims would set out for Ishaki in secret, usually at night, so that no one would notice their absence from the village, and so that the sacrifice "would be pleasing to the menacing Russian god."⁹⁶ By 1910 preparations involved the family washing in the bathhouse, then one family member going to the local church to put up candles so that the local icons would not begrudge the veneration of a distant, unfamiliar saint. On the road the pilgrim was to be a model Christian and "try to behave himself as well as possible, avoid superfluous affairs and conversations with other travelers."⁹⁷ He was to have no arguments or even listen to them.⁹⁸ The pilgrim took nothing with him and was to bring nothing back apart from one candle for the local church.⁹⁹

According to V.K. Magnitsky in 1877, on arrival in Ishaki

the Chuvash have no intention of serving a *moleben* as Russians and Cheremys do, but only light a candle and make their request to God, often in the form of a threat. [...] As they leave the church in Ishaki, the Chuvash light candles and leave money and pieces of bread by the brick chapel by the fence at the carved Crucifix by the outer wall of the church, on the door at the entrance under the bell-tower, by the wooden chapel at the spring where, according to tradition, the wonderworking icon of Saint Nicholas was "found." [...] as a result of the enormous daily throng of Chuvash pilgrims, even from the Samara and Orenburg provinces [...] poor Chuvash manage to collect whole sacks of pieces of bread and then dry small pieces for sale by the *pud*.¹⁰⁰

N.I. Zolotnitsky tells us that the pilgrims bought bread buns specially made in the village, and by the chapel stood a chest for the bread so that dogs and ravens would not eat the vast offerings that accumulated.¹⁰¹ A 1910 article emphasized that the Chuvash already ordered *molebens* before the icon, whereas formerly they had splashed vodka on the chapel wall and thrown pieces of bread into the spring.¹⁰² In a less flattering 1909 report, a graduate of the Kazan Missionary Courses,¹⁰³ G. Stepanov, tells us that pilgrims put up a candle with a request to punish their enemies.¹⁰⁴

If Chuvash made their requests as a threat, it was due to their ideas about a very human Saint Nicholas. He was considered to be capricious and would complain to God if pilgrims did not venerate him alone, which was why on the way home some Chuvash did not call in at other

parish churches.¹⁰⁵ According to the above Stepanov, “Saint Nicholas is considered the angriest of gods and some are afraid of venerating him, fearing to anger him. They think he is a pagan idol or *kiremet*.”¹⁰⁶ An archival chronicle (letopis) of Musirma parish, Tsivilsk district tells us that “they call Saint Nicholas God and believe he demands they put up candles in Ishaki or [he] will send illness to the family.”¹⁰⁷ Zolotnitsky gives an example of a prayer at Ishaki: “Look here, Migula-tora (Nicholas-god)! Perhaps my neighbor Maksim has said something to you about me or tells tales. Don’t you listen to him. I’ve done nothing wrong to him and wish him no evil—he’s a good-for-nothing and a show-off.”¹⁰⁸

The Russian priest Vasilii Smelov in 1880 reported a humorous story recounted by the Chuvash which helps us to understand how they had transferred what Smelov perceived as their conception of the *kiremet* as a threatening spirit that needed appeasing, to Saint Nicholas and the “Russian God.” The story goes that once Saint Nicholas and God came down to earth and got lost. God sent Saint Nicholas in the direction of some smoke to enquire of the way, and he came upon a bathhouse where a woman was giving birth. “Nikola, mistaking the bathhouse for a house, decided to walk straight into the bathhouse; but he had scarcely opened the door when the midwife flew at him shouting, ‘Where do you think you’re going, you Russian?’ and hit Nikola with her switch of branches.” An angry Nikola returned to God and asked him to deprive the newly-born of happiness in life, at which his parents and their livestock died, their house and possessions all burnt down, and the crops were ruined by hail.¹⁰⁹

The significance attached to the Ishaki icon is shown by the fact that, if a person could not go themselves, there were a variety of means of showing that you intended to go but for the moment could not, or of replacing the trip entirely. The Iadrin Chuvash had chapels on the market squares in Khora-kasy, Ikkovo and Unga where they could pass on candles to Ishaki.¹¹⁰ Sometimes a Chuvash would add another coin to the one already promised and ask Nikola to wait. If all else failed, others “take the coin secretly at night out into the yard and throw it into the neighbor’s yard. [. . .] In this way the duty of venerating the Ishaki icon is transferred to the neighbor. The one finding such a coin sees it as a bad omen and sets off immediately for Ishaki despite all obstacles. Sometimes people take the promised coin out into a field and throw it in the direction of Ishaki.”¹¹¹

Although the Ishaki icon was the most revered, there were other icons to which the Chuvash went on pilgrimage or called in on their way to Ishaki, or which were taken on procession so that believers could venerate them. The human-sized, carved wooden icon of Saint Nicholas from the Holy Trinity men’s monastery in Cheboksary was much venerated and carried round nearby villages on his feast days.¹¹² (fig. 3) A significant example is that of Tsivilsk district where in the 1870s all the churches were largely empty apart from Bagildino where much-venerated icons of Saint Nicholas and the Mother of God “Joy of All Who Sorrow” drew many pilgrims.¹¹³ Before the 1830s, the local Chuvash had gathered at a *kiremet* at some elm trees in the Kunar forest a few versts from Bagildino church. According to local tradition, not far from the trees a Chuvash

had dug up an icon of the Crucifixion of the Savior which he had given to the local mill-owner. News of the icon's appearance had caused even more Chuvash to visit the site, at first at night then more publicly in daylight. When the Bagildino priest Fr. Ioann Akramovsky ordered the trees to be chopped down, the Chuvash continued to go there so Akramovsky had a wooden chapel built and put icons from the church there. The wooden chapel burnt down due to a lighted candle and a stone church was built which, due to a legal dispute with a neighboring parish over ownership of the site, was eventually taken down and the icons taken to Bagildino church. After that, pilgrims went to the church rather than the *kiremet*, according to an 1872 report in the *Kazan Diocesan News*.¹¹⁴ Magnitsky, writing in 1877, tells us that Chuvash pilgrims on their way to Ishaki and other locations would call in at both Bagildino church and at the Kunar *kiremet*.

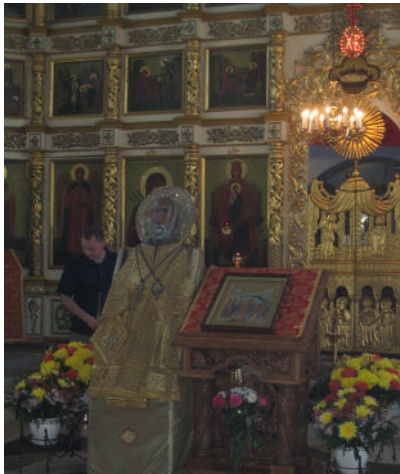


Fig. 3 Carved wooden icon of Saint Nicholas in the Monastery of the Holy Trinity, Cheboksary, Chuvashia. With kind permission of Archimandrite Vasilii, Abbot of the monastery (photo: author)

A striking account of how Archbishop Vladimir of Kazan used the pilgrimage to Ishaki to encourage the Chuvash to abandon the Old Faith and acquire new understandings of the Ishaki pilgrimage occurs in the chronicle of the Church of the Tikhvin Icon of the Mother of God in Musirma, Tsivilsk district.¹¹⁵ Archbishop Vladimir presided over a Liturgy at the church on September 19, 1893 when two choirs were formed of seventy-five pupils from local schools. So many parishioners attended that it took two hours for them all to venerate the cross at the end of the service. When the Archbishop asked them to do something special to commemorate this event, the villagers made an agreement to no longer turn to the *iomzi* for advice, nor carry out sacrifices nor open wine stalls.

In response the Archbishop decided to make them a gift of an icon of the Tikhvin Mother of God, but rather than just sending the icon, he asked the new Chuvash priest, Fr. Gavriil Spiridonov, and his parishioners to walk to Ishaki to attend the consecration of a new church and receive the icon. The parishioners expressed “willingness to go for the icon. The pupils of the parish schools with their teachers set off on foot for Ishaki in good time.”¹¹⁶ On June 14, 1894, after walking for two days, three hundred members of the Musirma parish received the icon from Archbishop Vladimir who reminded them of their promise to leave their pagan ways and asked Fr. Gavriil to repeat his words in Chuvash in Musirma.

The icon was carried home accompanied by the singing of the school pupils. On the first evening they reached Tsivilsk where the icon was placed overnight in a chapel on the Market Square before being met next morning by a procession of all the town's clergy and parishioners who accompanied the icon to the Tsivilsk Monastery for the Liturgy. When the icon set off again it was greeted in each village with bread and salt and a *moleben* was served.¹¹⁷ On the evening of June 15, the icon was placed in the school-church in Staro-Arabosy where the Novoisheevo clergy served a *moleben* the next day, before accompanying the icon to the edge of the village. As the icon approached Musirma, the bells rang and the villagers gathered to accompany the icon to their parish church. The parishioners sent a message to the Archbishop saying that "apart from minor exceptions they had all left their pagan rites and customs." Not entirely satisfied, the Archbishop replied that they were all to tell their relatives to give up pagan ways so that "not one servant of the devil remained."¹¹⁸

Shevzov's comment that "the routing of specially revered icons [. . .] had the practical effect of incorporating otherwise isolated communities into a broader body of [the] faithful with a shared experience"¹¹⁹ helps us to appreciate Archbishop Vladimir's strategy here. The Tikhvin Mother of God, as we have seen, was not only the protectress of the Musirma parish, but also of the Tsivilsk monastery, the spiritual center of the Tsivilsk district. As the icon journeyed from Ishaki to Tsivilsk, it would have created communal coherence not only between the district's isolated parishes but also with the wider faith community represented by the Archbishop, the Tsivilsk Tikhvin monastery and the Orthodox parishes of the Tsivilsk district. The communal coherence would have extended as far as Ishaki with its pilgrims who flocked from several provinces and Fr. Daniil Filimonov, the Musirma parish's beloved former priest who had been transferred to direct the new Ishaki Teacher Training School.

The way that the Tikhvin icon and the Ishaki icon of Saint Nicholas developed communal coherence and belonging exemplifies recent anthropological research which shows that the clear distinction between persons and objects taken for granted in Western Europe and North America is in other societies made along different lines, "with objects and people connected through networks of relations" so that "their present meanings are partly determined by the persons with which they interacted and the events they were part of."¹²⁰ Hanganu therefore refers to material culture elements such as the icon as "relational nodes connecting the material, social and spiritual worlds,"¹²¹ an apt description of the network of relations in which the Tikhvin icons of the Tsivilsk district and the Ishaki icon of Saint Nicholas were entangled.

The Expanding Geography of Pilgrimage and Changing Perceptions of the Icon

The way that icons "linked individuals and local ecclesial communities into a larger body of [the] faithful"¹²² is reflected in the way that, with the increasing knowledge of the Russian language provided by late nineteenth-century schools, the Chuvash gradually began to go further afield than sacred locations on Chuvash territory. An educated Chuvash from Teneevo (Tsivilsk dis-

trict), Sergei Aleksandrov, was healed of an illness brought on by his mother's curse when in 1898 he travelled to Kazan and Sviazhsk to venerate the relics of the Kazan wonderworkers.¹²³ The mother of a teacher from Iadrin district, A.P. Prokopiev, on abandoning the Old Faith "decided to travel around the monasteries and pray only to one God."¹²⁴ In 1910 Fr. Daniil Filimonov wrote that, "Within the last 20–30 years religious natives have begun to go on pilgrimage to monasteries. During the Apostles' Fast and Lent they go to take communion in the monasteries, order prayers for the departed, make offerings of bread, money, farm animals etc. Nothing similar could be observed among the natives previously."¹²⁵

Nikolai Ilminsky wrote in 1886 about his concern that a twenty-six-year-old pupil of Simbirsk Chuvash Teachers' School had taken a liking to travelling to distant holy places, including a desire to go to Jerusalem.¹²⁶ Ilminsky again wrote in 1890 of how Chuvash of Kazan province had gone to the Sedmiozernaia and Raifa monasteries¹²⁷ for communion in Lent, including two who had walked 350 *versts* from Samara province.¹²⁸ Fr. Gavriil Spiridonov in 1910 attributed the increasing numbers of Chuvash becoming monks or nuns, or going on pilgrimage to Jerusalem or Mount Athos, to the spiritual movement which had arisen due to the use of the native language in churches.¹²⁹

As the Chuvash began to expand their ecclesial horizons to outside their own territories, and as education gave them access to more standard Orthodox teaching on the icon, a concern to improve Chuvash popular understanding of icons seems to have emerged. We have seen above Fr. Daniil Filimonov's 1890 report on his Musirma parish in which he expressed concern at the Chuvash popular understanding of icons.

In 1894 Filimonov was transferred to serve as priest in Ishaki in order to direct the new two-class teachers' school and to preach in Chuvash to the crowds of pilgrims. During 1894–95 he and two other teachers at the school wrote two brochures in Chuvash, one explaining holy communion and another about the icon of Saint Nicholas at Ishaki, 3000 copies of which were published for free distribution to pilgrims (fig. 4, fig. 5).¹³⁰ Filimonov was concerned not only that the Chuvash should have a truly Orthodox understanding of the icon, but also that icons should be painted in a canonical way, and to this end opened an icon-painting workshop in 1896 at Ishaki School. An 1898 account from the village of Teneevo in Tsivilsk district shows us Fr. Filimonov's icon booklet being used to try to bring more standard ideas about the icon to the Chuvash.

When one hundred *pudy*¹³¹ of oats went missing from a communal barn, all the men of the village gathered at an assembly (*skhod*) and resolved to meet in a gully outside the village where a huge oak, considered sacred by the Chuvash, had formerly stood. According to the traditional rites of the village, each man had to stand before the stump of the tree at this *kiremet* with earth in his mouth, and swear an oath asking God that his body would dry up like the stump if he was guilty of the crime.

At this time, half of the population of Teneevo had been baptized into the Orthodox faith, while

the other unbaptized villagers the author describes as pagan. In 1887 a primary school had been opened for the first time in the village where almost everyone had previously been illiterate. On hearing of the men's intention to discover the thief "using pagan rites," the village schoolteacher sent Aleksandrov, the literate Chuvash in whose home he lived, to the village assembly to persuade the men to give up their pagan practices. Aleksandrov remonstrated with them: "We baptized people should not pray by a tree somewhere in the gully; the place for prayer is God's church and there before the holy icons we should pray to God asking him for help and protection, and not before a soulless tree." In his efforts to convince the men, he took out Filimonov's booklet which explained the Orthodox meaning of the holy icons in the Chuvash language. When he finished, however, they began to object: "You tell us that worshipping God in the gully is idolatry. Is it not the same as your worship of icons? They are made from wood with human hands; so you, just like us, are praying to a tree."



Fig. 4 Fr. Daniil Filimonov, *O sv. chudotvornoi ikone nakhodiashcheisia v tserkvi sela Ishak Kozmodem'ianskago uезда Kazanskoi eparkhii na chuvashkom iazyke* (On the Holy Miracleworking Icon in the Church of the Village of Ishaki, Kozmodemiansk District, Kazan Diocese in the Chuvash Language), 2nd ed. (Kazan: Bratstvo sviatitelia Guriia, 1896), title page. With kind permission of Bishop Ignatii (Suranov) of Mariino-Posad, Chuvashia (photo: author)

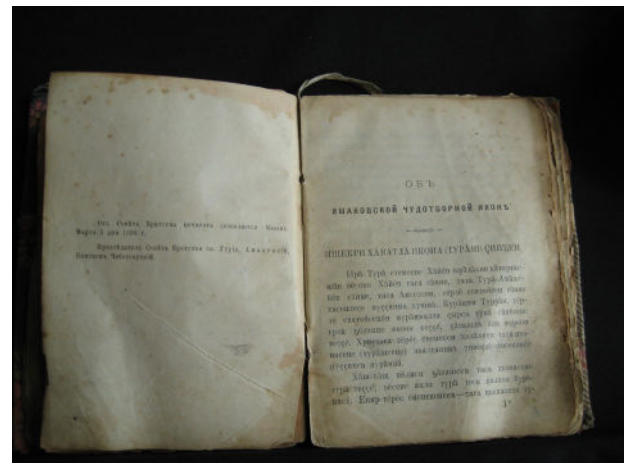


Fig. 5 First page of Fr. Daniil Filimonov, *O sv. chudotvornoi ikone nakhodiashcheisia v tserkvi sela Ishak Kozmodem'ianskago uезда Kazanskoi eparkhii na chuvashkom iazyke* (fig. 4)

According to the author, a Kazan educational official, Aleksandrov's story made such an impression on the Teneevo Chuvash that they decided not to take the oath.¹³² The account draws attention to the role that the written word was beginning to play in Chuvash culture at the turn of the twentieth century. It is the schoolteacher, a figure who had only been present in the community for ten years, who sends the literate Aleksandrov, armed with a recent publication in the vernacular Chuvash language, to challenge the pagan practices. The response of the Chuvash—"you, just like us, are praying to a tree"—also helps us to understand why the sacred wood of the icon had been able to become a point of correspondence with the sacred tree in Chuvash traditional rites, and had facilitated the way that in the late nineteenth-century journeys to *kiremets* and their sacred trees were being transformed into pilgrimages to Christian holy places and miracle-working icons.

The Role of Icons in the Reception of Orthodoxy in Other Regions of the Russian Empire

Similar phenomena to those we have observed among the Chuvash—the way that icons had become indigenous religious objects drawn into local beliefs and practices, as well as the common perception of such beliefs and practices as paganism, superstition or superficial outward expressions of Orthodoxy—have been observed in many former regions of the Russian Empire. The Finno-Ugric Seto who today live in the borderlands straddling southern Estonia and the Pskov region of Russia, encountered Russian Orthodoxy as early as the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries and possibly earlier. Although today their Orthodoxy is entirely integral to their Seto identity, their practices such as feeding, bringing presents to, and making oaths before icons, as well as surrounding a wooden statue of Saint Nicholas with offerings of food on Saint Nicholas' Day, have led to their faith being described as paganism, superstition, primitive, and outward by Estonian Lutheran observers, while Russians have described them as “half-believers” (*poluvertsy*).¹³³ Similar criticisms of paganism and superstition have been leveled at the Turkic Gagauzes of the northeast Balkans who are considered to have adopted Orthodoxy in the thirteenth century and for whom, like the Seto, their Orthodoxy is a vital element of their ethnic identity. Their culture has retained many archaic elements adopted from surrounding Orthodox Balkan peoples, as well as many Turkic elements, and has many similarities to Chuvash beliefs and practices as described by nineteenth-century observers.¹³⁴

Znamenski writes of the reception of Orthodoxy by the peoples of the Altai mountains in Siberia that “specific artifacts of Orthodoxy did not necessarily contradict indigenous tradition and as such could be easily adjusted to native beliefs.”¹³⁵ He notes in particular how Saint Nicholas was absorbed into indigenous religious practices among the Altaians, the Khanty of the Ob river basin, and the Alaskan Tlingits, whose reliance on fishing led to especial veneration for Saint Nicholas as the patron saint of fishermen.¹³⁶ Sergei Kan concludes that “the fact that the Russian Church offered its members a variety of potent sacred objects made it more attractive” to the Tlingits who had great reverence for icons, crosses, and candles, which were seen as powerful protectors.¹³⁷ He considers that it was precisely because of the Orthodox Church's use of symbolic acts and sacred objects that the Tlingit could develop a more indigenized form of Christianity as they assigned their own meanings to Orthodox symbols without deviating in any major way from Orthodox ritual practice.¹³⁸

Where the Boundary Between Heaven and Earth Becomes Thin: The Icon in Orthodox Theological Understanding

What is it about the icon that enabled it to play this role of mediator in the above situations and resonate so readily with indigenous coefficients? In his discussion of the symbolic nature of the Orthodox mysteries or sacraments, Andrew Louth comments that symbols invest the visible and material with a meaning that transcends them and that “icons can be seen as a particular exten-

sion of the symbolic world, founded on matter.”¹³⁹ Thus the materiality of the icon provides not only an image of the reality it depicts, but provides access and direct encounter with that reality, and thus comes to partake of the holiness of the people or events depicted.¹⁴⁰ Louth reminds us that Celtic spirituality, both pagan and Christian, sometimes speaks of places where the boundary between heaven and earth becomes thin. He considers the icon to be such a place of “thinness” so that the “beholder of the icon [. . .] finds him- or herself passing through the in-between and entering this other world.”¹⁴¹

This understanding of the icon emerges out of a broader perception of the unity of the visible and invisible worlds which is expressed in the following way by the seventh-century theologian Saint Maximus the Confessor: “The world is one . . . for the spiritual world in its totality is manifested in the totality of the perceptible world, mystically expressed in symbolic pictures for those who have eyes to see. And the perceptible world in its entirety is secretly fathomable by the spiritual world in its entirety. . .”¹⁴² This interpretation of the world as a theophany (manifesting God or the divine) is described by Olivier Clément as “that grand contribution of the ancient religions to understanding” and he argues that it finds a full place in Christianity.¹⁴³

For the Chuvash and other peoples of the Mid-Volga, the sacred groves and trees, the graveyards, and the boundaries of village and fields also represented such places of “thinness” where communication between the visible and invisible worlds took place. They were the “in-between spaces” where it could be understood from personal experience that the spiritual world is manifest in the totality of the perceptible world. These indigenous coefficients would appear to have contributed to their reception of the Spirit-bearing matter of the icon during the time when word-based mediation of Orthodoxy was hindered by the Slavonic language of the liturgy, and the lack of vernacular literacy and a native language-speaking clergy.

The way that icons and other forms of Orthodox spirituality have become woven into the very fabric of Chuvash culture helps to account for the persistence of Orthodoxy among the Chuvash despite the tragedy and turmoil of twentieth-century Russia. The seventeenth-century Tsivilsk Tikhvin icon of the Mother of God and the life-sized wooden icon of Nikola in Cheboksary are still venerated by hundreds of pilgrims, while new icons and frescoes on the walls of monasteries and churches in Chuvashia are witnesses to a living iconographic tradition (fig. 6, fig. 7).



Fig. 6 Aleksandr Kuzmin and Andrei Kurushin, fresco of Saint Peter Walking on the Water, Refectory of the Holy Trinity Monastery, Cheboksary, Chuvashia, 2013 (photo: author)



Fig. 7 Aleksandr Kuzmin and Andrei Kurushin, fresco of Christ Feeding the Five Thousand, Refectory of the Holy Trinity Monastery, Cheboksary, Chuvashia, 2013 (photo: author)



New life has also been breathed into old sacred sites while new ones are emerging such as the chapel built over a spring at the Metochion of the Tsvilsk women's monastery in Pervoe Stepanovo, Tsvilsk district (fig. 8). On the Feast of the New Martyrs of Chuvashia (Third Sunday after Pentecost), thousands of pilgrims throng to the site of the labor camp in Pervomaiskoe, Alaty district where the Divine Liturgy is held in fields which contain the bones of those who perished there, and the canvas iconostasis unfurled among the trees reveals how Chuvash understandings of sacred space have been fully integrated into their Orthodoxy (fig. 9, fig. 10).

Fig. 8 Chapel built over a spring at the Metochion of the Tsvilsk women's monastery in the village of Pervoe Stepanovo, Chuvashia, 2014 (photo: author)



Fig. 9 Service for the Sunday of the Chuvash New Martyrs, Pervomaiskoe, Alatyr district, Chuvashia, 2018 (photo: author)



Fig. 10 Service for the Sunday of the Chuvash New Martyrs, Pervomaiskoe, Alatyr district, Chuvashia, 2018 (photo: author)

Conclusion

The above prerevolutionary ethnographic accounts reveal the way the icon was drawn into the everyday lived religion of the Chuvash and became an object of veneration and pilgrimage, thus contributing to the transmission of Orthodoxy before the spread of education and literacy among the Chuvash from the 1830s. They also suggest that icons as “relational nodes connecting the material, social and spiritual worlds”¹⁴⁴ corresponded to indigenous coefficients such as the sacred trees and groves, thus arousing genuine religious experience and laying the groundwork for later textual transmission of Orthodox teaching at the time of the vernacular educational movement. They thus challenge the *dvoeverie*-inspired division of the history of the Volga-Kama region, and other regions of the Russian Empire, into a period of pristine traditional ancient ancestral faith, followed by the superficial imposition of syncretistic Orthodox faith. The proponents of the missionary movement themselves greatly contributed to perceptions of nineteenth-century Chuvash religious practices as paganism and thus promoted the concept of *dvoeverie* which they considered to have been the result of previous non-textual means of mediating Orthodoxy. Yet it is doubtful that the educational movement would have had such an impact without media such as the icon both preparing the ground and continuing to be a mediator of faith alongside more cognitive forms of education.

The way that the materiality and spirituality of the icon were drawn into indigenous religious experience challenges the very basis of the concept of *dvoeverie* and its assumption of a lack of common ground between the pre-Christian religious experience and beliefs of the Volga-Kama peoples and Orthodox Christian cosmology. We have seen how this assumption and its accompanying terminology were largely the fabrications of the missionaries themselves, arising out of their desire for more standard practices and understandings of Orthodox belief and ritual. Their use of the language of paganism and syncretism which accompanied a desire for uniform practices as an expression of institutional centralization and unity, raises the question of whether room

can be made for local diversity within Orthodoxy. It reveals a need for greater appreciation of how Orthodoxy as a living tradition can be creatively received and indigenized in contexts outside of traditionally Orthodox territories.

A greater acceptance and acknowledgement of such local diversity would point to a third, more viable alternative to the dilemma described by Salmin, between going back to the caves or coming to ruin in the clutches of civilization. Further understanding of the way that the icon has contributed to Christianizing the ancient religious culture of the Chuvash, as well as the other non-Slavic cultures referred to above, could enable scholars to recognize that an indigenous Orthodoxy has been, and could increasingly become, a way of retaining much of the ancient culture of indigenous peoples, albeit in a transformed way.

The role played by the icon among the Chuvash also points to a greater need to study not only the icon, but other “sensuous expressions of the sublime,”¹⁴⁵ other non-textual media such as music, sound, taste and fragrance in the context of Orthodoxy’s encounter with new social and cultural milieu both within and outside its familiar territories.¹⁴⁶

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Dr Alison Kolosova is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Tartu University, Estonia. Her PhD (Durham University, UK) focused on Nikolai Ilminsky and the influence of Russian Orthodox missions on the ethnic and religious identity of the Turkic and Finno-Ugric peoples of the Mid-Volga region where she lived for twenty years.

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- 20 See for example N. I. Il'minskii, "Zapiska N. I. Il'minskago o perevodcheskoi komissii," *Prilozhenie k Otchetu Bratstva Sv. Guriia za 1875–76* (Kazan, 1875–76), 64–65.
- 21 Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion*, 238.
- 22 See C. J. Chulos, "The End of Cultural Survivals (perezhitki): Remembering and Forgetting Russian Peasant Religious Traditions," in *Studia Slavica Finlandensia* 17 (2000): 191.
- 23 P. V. Denisov, *Religioznye verovaniia Chuvash* (Cheboksary: Chuvashskii Gosudarstvennyi Institut Gumanitarnykh Nauk, 1959), 119, 134.
- 24 See Chulos, "The End of Cultural Survivals," 193.
- 25 Eve Levin, "Dvoverie and Popular Religion," in S. K. Batalden, ed., *Seeking God: The Recovery of Religious Identity in Orthodox Russia, Ukraine and Georgia* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1993), 36.
- 26 A. K. Salmin, *Narodnaia obriadnost' chuvashskoi* (Cheboksary: Chuvashskii Gumanitarnyi Institut, 1994), 7–8.
- 27 Salmin, *Narodnaia obriadnost'*, 8.
- 28 Taimasov, *Pravoslavnaia tserkov'*, 70.
- 29 Taimasov, *Pravoslavnaia tserkov'*, 445.
- 30 Geraci, *Window on the East*, 33, 196.
- 31 Werth, *At the Margins of Orthodoxy*, 7; P. W. Werth, "From 'Pagan' Muslims to 'Baptized' Communists: Religious Conversion and Ethnic Particularity in Russia's Eastern Provinces," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42, no. 3 (2000): 497.
- 32 Rock, *Popular Religion*, 118.
- 33 Rock, *Popular Religion*, 89, 146.
- 34 Mousalimas, *From Mask to Icon*, 88.
- 35 Spiridon M. Mikhailov (1821–61) is today considered the first native Chuvash ethnographer and writer. His experience as a clerk and translator in the *volost* administration and *zemstvo* court provided material for his statistical and ethnographic accounts of the Chuvash and Cheremys which were published in *Kazanskii gubernskie vedomosti* (Kazan Provincial News) in the 1850s.
- 36 "Chudotvornye i osobenno mestnochtimye ikony i krestnye khody v Kazanskoi eparkhii," *Izvestiia po Kazanskoi eparkhii* (hereafter cited as *IKE*) 13 (1872), 23–25; S. M. Mikhailov, *Trudy po etnografii i istorii russkogo, chuvashskogo i mariiskogo narodov* (Cheboksary: Issledovatel'skii Institut pri Sovete Ministrov Chuvashskoi ASSR, 1972), 220, 239.
- 37 "Chudotvornye i osobenno," 393.
- 38 "Chudotvornye i osobenno," 227–8; Mikhailov, *Trudy*, 126.
- 39 The mountain Mari lived on the right bank of the Volga near Kozmodemiansk where there were more hills than on the left bank. The Chuvash living in this region were sometimes known by this name too.
- 40 Mikhailov, *Trudy*, 169.

- 41 Mikhailov, *Trudy*, 177.
- 42 Mikhailov uses the actual word “metropolis” and by the “direct sense of the word” he would appear to be referring to the term “metropolia,” an ecclesial administrative unit supervised by a Metropolitan.
- 43 Mikhailov, *Trudy*, 181.
- 44 Mikhailov, *Trudy*, 232.
- 45 From the Russian word for seven (*sem*) as Pentecost is held seven weeks after Easter.
- 46 Magnitskii, *Materialy*, 186. See also Salmin, *Narodnaia obriadnost*, 84–88.
- 47 Mikhailov, *Trudy*, 181–4, 233.
- 48 Archbishop Filaret (Amfiteatrov), 1779–1857.
- 49 Bishop Kirill (Bogoslovskii-Platonov), 1788–1849.
- 50 E. Malov, “Pravoslavnaia protivomusul'manskaia missiia v Kazanskom krae,” in *Pravoslavnyi sobesednik* (1870) ch. 2, 233–60.
- 51 S. Vasil'evskii, *Sviatitel' Filaret (Amfiteatrov) Mitropolit Kievskii i Galitskii i ego vremia* (Kazan: Tipo-Litografiia I.S. Perova, 1888), vol. 2, 43–44.
- 52 Fr. Viktor Vishnevskii (1804–85) grew up in Sugut-Torbikovo (Iadrin district, Kazan province) speaking both Chuvash and Russian. He became a lecturer at Kazan Seminary in 1826, then from 1843 was a missionary who toured Chuvash villages. See V.G. Rodionov, *Viktor Vishnevskii. Pis'mennaia kul'tura rannego prosvetitel'stva*, (Cheboksary: Izdatel'stvo Chuvashskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta, 2004)
- 53 Nauchnyi Arkhiv Chuvashskogo Gosudarstvennogo Instituta Gumanitarnykh Nauk (hereafter cited as NA CGIGN), otd.1, ed. khr.222, l.63, 71, 285–92.
- 54 V.P. Vishnevskii, *O religioznykh pover'iakh chuvash. Iz zapisok missionera Protoiereia V.P. Vishnevskago* (Kazan: n.p., 1846), 26.
- 55 In the 1820s, Metropolitan Filaret (Drozdov) of Moscow (1782–1867) wrote the catechisms which were used for basic instruction throughout the Russian church and state during the nineteenth century.
- 56 V.P. Vishnevskii, *Nachertanie pravil chuvashskogo iazyka i slovar', sostavlennye dlia dukhovnykh uchilishch Kazanskoi eparkhii* (Kazan: Universitetskaia Tipografiia, 1836) and *Nachatki khristianskogo ucheniia, ili kratkaia sviashchennaia istoriia i kratkii katikhizis na chuvashskom iazyke* (Kazan: Universitetskaia tipografiia, 1832).
- 57 Gregory Freeze, “The Rechristianization of Russia: The Church and Popular Religion, 1750–1850,” in *Studia Slavica Finlandensia* 7 (1990): 102–4.
- 58 Vasilii Sboev (1810–55) was a Russian who grew up in the Chuvash village of Koshki-Churashevo (Cheboksary district, Kazan province). After studying at the St Petersburg Academy from 1829 to 1833 he returned to Kazan to become a Professor of Russian Literature at the University. His *Zametki o chuvashakh* published in 1856 were written originally as letters for the *Kazan Provincial News* in the 1840s–50s.
- 59 The *iomzi* was the Chuvash folk healer and specialist in traditional rites and beliefs.
- 60 V.A. Sboev, *Issledovaniia ob inorodtsakh Kazanskoi gubernii. Zametki o chuvashakh* (Kazan: Gubernskaia Tipografiia, 1856). Republished as a facsimile (Cheboksary: Chuvashskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 2004), 50–52.
- 61 Sboev, *Issledovaniia*, 41.
- 62 N.I. Zolotnitskii, *Kornevoi chuvashsko-russkii slovar' sravnennnyi s iazykami i narechiiami raznykh narodov tiurkskago, finskago i drugih plemen* (Kazan: V tipografii Imperatorskago Universiteta, 1875), 220.
- 63 Arkhangel'skii, *Chuvashi Kazanskoi gubernii*, 6; Magnitskii, *Materialy*, 126–7.
- 64 *Trudy*, 169.
- 65 Gosudarstvennyi Istoricheskii Arkhiv Chuvashskoi Respubliki (hereafter cited as GIA CR), f.350, op.1, d.4, l.112v.
- 66 Magnitskii, *Materialy*, 62–65.
- 67 Sboev, *Issledovaniia*, 43; Rodionov, *Viktor Vishnevskii*, 219, 227–8; V.Smelov, “Besedy s chuvashami o vere khrist-

tianskoi," *IKE*, 4 (1879): 102–9.

68 I.A. Iznoskov, "Missionerskaia, Bratstva sv. Guriia shkola v sele Ishakakh (Kazanskoi gubernii)," *Pravoslavnyi blagovestnik* (hereafter cited as *PB*), 22 (1895): 270.

69 D. F. Filimonov, "Doklad sviashchennika sela Musirma, Tsivil'skago uezda, Daniila Filimonova," *IKE*, 5 (1890): 98–99.

70 A. Rekeev, "Iz chuvashskikh predanii i verovanii," *IKE* (1896): 337–41.

71 Rekeev, "Iz chuvashskikh predanii," 418.

72 N. Ostroumov, "Prigotovlenie umiraiushchego k smerti u kreshchenykh chuvash Kazanskoi gubernii," *IKE* (1876): 400–4, 402.

73 Ostroumov, "Prigotovlenie umiraiushchego", 402.

74 V. Smelov, "Ocherk religioznykh verovanii chuvash," in Magnitskii, *Materialy*, 258–9.

75 Salmin, *Narodnaia obriadnost'*, 158.

76 Rekeev, "Iz chuvashskikh predanii," 420.

77 G. Komissarov, "Chuvashi Kazanskogo Zavolzh'ia," in *Izvestiia Obshchestva arkhologii, istorii i etnografii pri Kazanskom universitete* 27, no. 5 (1911), 390.

78 N.V. Nikol'skii, *Kratkii konspekt po etnografii chuvash* (Kazan: Tipografiia O.P. Liustritskoi, 1908), 139.

79 V. Zaikov, "Raport sviashchennika Tsivil'skago uezda, sela Koshelei, Voznesenskoii tserkvi Viktora Zaikova," *IKE* (1890): 175.

80 P. Mike, "Po Chuvashskim prikhodam. Iz moego dnevnika za 1898 g.," *IKE* (1904): 703–4.

81 G. Filippov, "Chuvashi Bichurinskogo prikhoda," *IKE* (1891): 124–7.

82 The *Sorma kiremet* was a sacred location where representatives of all villages in Cheboksary and Tsivilsk districts gathered for prayers and sacrifices after the spring ploughing. See Magnitskii, *Materialy*, 9.

83 G. Spiridonov, "Iz proshlogo v zhizni chuvash," *IKE* (1910): 1090.

84 Chuvashskii Natsionalnyi Muzei, Cheboksary (hereafter cited as CNM), f. 20 (uch. no. VM 4490), l. 5, 12.

85 N. Ostroumov, "Prigotovlenie umiraiushchago," 402–3.

86 GIA CR, f. 498, op. 1, d. 1, l. 19v. The Musirma parish was formed in 1882 from villages which formerly belonged to Kovali parish.

87 GIA CR, f. 498, op. 1, d. 1, l. 19v.

88 Rekeev, "Iz chuvashskikh predanii," 422.

89 Magnitskii, *Materialy*, 227.

90 P. Mike, "Po chuvashskim prikhodam," 723–6.

91 N.I. Zolotnitskii, *Kornevoi chuvashsko-russkii slovar'*, 167; Nauchnyi arkhiv Chuvashskogo Gosudarstvennogo Instituta Gumanitarnykh Nauk (hereafter cited as NA CGIGN), otd. 1, t.166, l.218.

92 Mike, "Po chuvashskim prikhodam," 726.

93 M. Vasil'ev, "O kiremetiakh u chuvash i cheremys," *IKE* (1904), 242–3, 251–2.

94 This was known as an irikh. Vasilii Timofeev describes in detail the same practice among the Old Baptized Tatars. Coins were hung in the pouch after the birth of a child and further coins were added in times of illness. When a daughter-in-law came into the family, she brought her own irikh with her. The irikh was only taken down when the person died. The coins were thrown into the grave of the unmarried to pay for their wedding in the next life, or they were used to buy bread to feed the dead. See N.I. Il'minskii, *Kazanskaia Tsentral'naia kreshcheno-tatarskaia shkola; materialy dlia istorii khristianskago prosveshcheniia kreshchenykh Tatar* (Kazan: Tipografiia V.M. Kliuchnikova, 1887), 20–21.

95 S.M., "Chuvashskoe pochitanie ikon," *Sotrudnik Bratstva Sviatitelia Guriia* (hereafter cited as *SBSG*), (October 1910): 783.

- 96 Mike, "Po chuvashskim prikhodam," 726.
- 97 S.M., "Chuvashskoe pochitanie," 783.
- 98 Mike, "Po chuvashskim prikhodam," 726.
- 99 Ostroumov, "Prigotovlenie umirasiushchego," 403.
- 100 Magnitskii, *Materialy*, 227–8.
- 101 NA CGIGN, otd. 1, t. 166, l. 218; Zolotnitskii, *Kornevoi slovar'* (1875), 168.
- 102 S.M., "Chuvashskoe pochitanie," 783.
- 103 The Kazan Missionary Courses were set up in the 1890s to give theological teaching to native clergy who did not have the educational qualifications to enter the seminary.
- 104 NA CGIGN, otd. 1, t. 166, l. 217.
- 105 S.M., "Chuvashskoe pochitanie," 784.
- 106 NA CGIGN, otd. 1, t. 166, l. 218.
- 107 GIA CR, f. 498, op. 1, d. 1, l. 19v.
- 108 Zolotnitskii, *Kornevoi slovar'*, 167.
- 109 Smelov, "Ocherk religioznykh verovaniĭ chuvash," 243–61.
- 110 Spiridonov, "Iz zhizni," 1091.
- 111 S.M., "Chuvashskoe pochitanie," 784.
- 112 Magnitskii, *Materialy*, 229.
- 113 I.A. Iznoskov "Religiozno-nravstvennoe sostoianie inorodtsev zhivushchikh v severo-vostochnoi chasti Tsvil'skago uezda, Kazanskaia guberniia," *PB*, 5 (March 1897): 220.
- 114 "Chudotvornye i osobenno," 401.
- 115 GIA CR, f. 498, op. 1, d. 1 Letopis' Tikhvinskoi tserkvi.
- 116 GIA CR, f. 498, op. 1, d. 1, l. 8.
- 117 Bread and salt are offered to guests as a sign of hospitality in Russian culture.
- 118 GIA CR, f. 498, op. 1, d. 1, l. 9–9v.
- 119 Shevzov, *Russian Orthodoxy*, 189.
- 120 Hanganu, "Eastern Christians and Religious Objects," 48–49.
- 121 Hanganu, "Eastern Christians and Religious Objects," 51.
- 122 Shevzov, *Russian Orthodoxy*, 173.
- 123 Mike, "Po chuvashskim prikhodam," 726.
- 124 A.P. Prokop'ev, "Prosvetiteli i zashchitniki khristianstva sredi chuvash i cheremis Koz'modem'ianskago uezda (Iz zapisok i vospominanii sel'skago uchitelia)" *IKE* (1906), 336.
- 125 D. Filimonov, "Ob inorodcheskikh monastyriakh i obshchinakh Volzhsko-Kamskago kraia," *SBSG* (October 1910), 759.
- 126 N.I. Il'minskii, *Pis'ma Nikolaia Ivanovicha Il'minskago* (Kazan: Tipo-litografiia Imperatorskago Universiteta, 1895), 188.
- 127 Both located near Kazan.
- 128 Il'minskii, *Pis'ma*, 340.
- 129 Spiridonov, "Iz zhizni," 1093.
- 130 Iznoskov, "Missionerskaia, Bratstva sv. Guriia shkola," *PB* (1895): 269.

- 131 The prerevolutionary unit of weight the *pud* is the equivalent of about 40 lbs or 16 kgs. One hundred *pudy* would therefore be just over one-and-a-half metric tons.
- 132 Mike, “Po chuvashskim prikhodom,” 723–6.
- 133 A. Kalkun, “Russkaia vera ili vizantiiskoe nasledie? Reprezentatsii pravoslaviia narodnosti setu v XX v.,” in *Pravoslavie v Pribaltike: religiia, politika, obrazovanie 1840–e–1930–e gg* (Tartu: University of Tartu Press, 2018), ed. I. Paert, 344, 346–8; J. Engelhardt, *Singing the Right Way: Orthodox Christians and Secular Enchantment in Estonia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 199–216; Iu. Trusman, “Poluvertsy Pskovo-Pecherskago kraia” *Zhivaia starina* 1, no. 1 (1891): 31–62.
- 134 E.N. Kvlinkova, “Kalendarnaia obriadnost’ gagauzov v kontse XIX–nachale XX vv.” (Kishinev: Unpublished Candidate dissertation, 2001), 130–8, 142. See also J.A. Kapalo, *Text, Context and Performance: Gagauz Folk Religion in Discourse and Practice* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).
- 135 Znamenski, *Shamanism and Christianity*, 221, 224–8.
- 136 Kan, *Memory Eternal*, 410; Znamenski, *Shamanism and Christianity*, 222; A.M. Ablazhei, “The Religious Worldview of the Indigenous Population of the Northern Ob’ as understood by Christian Missionaries,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 29, no. 3 (July 2005): 138.
- 137 Kan, *Memory Eternal*, 412.
- 138 Kan, *Memory Eternal*, 419.
- 139 A. Louth, *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2013), 101, 113.
- 140 Louth, *Introducing*, 116.
- 141 Louth, *Introducing*, 115.
- 142 Maximus the Confessor, *Mystagogia*, 2 (Patrologia Graeca, Migne 91, 669), quoted in Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism* (London: New City: 1993), 219.
- 143 Clément, *Roots*, 221.
- 144 See Hanganu, “Eastern Christians and Religious Objects,” 51.
- 145 The phrase is used as a subheading for articles relating to religious images and music in Hann and Goltz, *Eastern Christians in Anthropological Perspective*.
- 146 For a further recent study with such an approach see Sonja Luehrmann, ed., *Praying with the Senses: Contemporary Orthodox Christian Spirituality in Practice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017).