

FILM REVIEWS

ON THE TREATMENT OF INDIGENOUS CULTURES IN LITERARY CULTURE

JURI VELLA MAAILM (Yuri Vella's World). Documentary, running time 58 minutes. Source material DVCAM. Master copy on Beta SP (in Russian and in Nenets). Sound: mono. Copies with subtitles in English, Russian, French and Estonian. In Estonian. Writer, director, camera operator, sound mixer and producer Liivo Niglas.

PÄIKESELAPSED (Children of the Sun). Research documentary about the Udmurt Identity. Authors Liis Ruussaar and Kristel Kaljund. Crew: Irina Orekhova, student of University of Tartu, photographer Thomas Kneißl, camera operator Priit Palomets. Editing by Liis Ruussaar, Urmas Sepp, Kristel Kaljund and Irina Orekhova. Estonian subtitles by Irina Orekhova, Liis Ruussaar and Kristel Kaljund; German subtitles by Kristel Kaljund. In Estonian.

The Udmurts, probably the last European ethnic group that was introduced to the Christian world, led a life independent of the literate world in their forested upcountry area until the northern Udmurts with the rest of the Vyatka territory (the history of which has remained one of the most complicated issues in Russian historiography) were incorporated into the Grand Principality of Moscow in 1489 (Grishkina 1994: 49). The contact of the Southern Udmurts with the literary Christian world occurred even later, after the discovery of America by Western Europeans and the subjugation of Kazan by the Russians in 1558. After the Russian conquest, however, the traditional Udmurt village communities, which had retained their status as state peasants, still remained independent of the serfdom of feudal Russia (Barta 1998).

Thus we may observe the Udmurt culture and its peacefulness as a perfect consistent agrarian tradition, which had no need for fast and easy wealth from plundering raids. As such, the Udmurts constitute a fine example of a culture that has not been subject to literary, political, scientific, etc. studies and which is both linguistically and geographically quite close to us, the Estonians. The number



Photo 1. Yuri Vella, the best-known Forest Nenets poet and the central character of Liivo Niglas' documentary, lives in tundra and breeds reindeer.
http://home.uninet.ee/~eva/estil/juri_vella.htm

of the Udmurts all over the world is comparable to the number of the Estonians before the national awakening (see Sarv 2002).

In January 1977, being about the age of the authors of *Päikeselapsed*, Liis Ruussaar and Kristel Kaljund, I was working as an ethnography consultant and director's assistant at the documentary "Winds of the Milky Way" (*Linnutee tuuled*). One morning I received a phone call from the director of the film, Lennart Meri, who asked me to sign and send folklore researcher Margarita Khrucheva a letter informing of our abandoning the filming of Udmurts in the dual film monography "People of Water Fowl" / "Winds of the Milky Way" (*Veelinnurahvas / Linnutee tuuled*) about all the Finno-Ugric peoples. Since then I have felt beholden to

the Udmurt culture, but the very next year I began to redeem my debt by describing the Udmurt native costumes collected by Aleksei Peterson at the Estonian National Museum (see Peterson 1997). Three and a half years later, in July 1980, I was with Aado Lintrop, assistant cameraman of *Linnutee tuuled* 'Winds of the Milky Way', and Aleksei Peterson in the sacred grove of Kuzybaevo, filming the ritual sacrifice performed by the adherents of the Udmurt nature religion. Around this time the interest of the Estonians in the Udmurts was growing, which, according to the authors of *Päikeselapsed* 'Children of the Sun', determined the choice of the ethnic subject portrayal in their documentary.

I have browsed through numerous web pages describing and introducing indigenous peoples, but have not found the Udmurts listed in any list of the indigenous peoples of the world. There are probably too many of them, and the natural conditions of their habitat

are too similar to those of the homelands of peoples, who have colonised and eventually destroyed most of the indigenous peoples of the world. The ethnical-political situation of the Udmurts does not allow the existence of the exotic world of Yuri Vella, whose simple story about bestowing a reindeer to the President of Russia may very well be awarded a grand prix from the Lyons Film Festival, but has, in its commercial repetitiveness, become tedious even to the author of the documentary, Liivo Niglas, who has chosen to cover the topic with a long quotation from a documentary on the same subject by German filmmakers. Europeans understand *Yuri Vella's World*, as the film follows the European moral values. A Forest Nenets reindeer breeder, however, would not understand the viewpoint.

Yuri Vella, Yeremi Aipin and Yuvan Shestalov have introduced elements of the fading cultures of the Forest Nenets, Eastern Khanty and Northern Mansi on the international level. Their actions have excluded them from their ethnic groups. The number of Udmurts is a few thousand, which makes it very difficult for lone individuals to reach the international cultural arena with only exotic remnants of one's indigenous culture. This, of course, is not entirely impossible: Lennart Meri, a president of a somewhat larger country, has managed that. Also, *Kalevipoeg* by Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald and *Kalevala* by Elias Lönnrot have, perhaps, achieved that, too. Hence the paradoxical inference that the indigenous culture of the Udmurts has preserved its homogeneity, which is stronger than the culture of the Forest Nenets or that of the Estonians; the Udmurts also have a greater respect for their native culture.

In the documentary the ethnic identity and cultural problems of the Udmurts are discussed by saleswoman Lyudmila Mamontova, school teacher Jelena Lavrentyeva, arts and crafts teacher Vyatcheslav Lavrentyev, textile artist Aleksandr Chetkaryov, designer of the Udmurt flag Yuri Lobanov, director of the publishing house *Udmurtiya* Yuri Kuznetsov, director of the cheese factory Anatoli Maksimov and journalist Lidia Orekhova. The U.S. national flag on the desk of Anatoli Maksimov symbolises the connections of the Udmurt cheese factory to the leading representative of the world culture. The absurdity of the cultural situation is demonstrated in an emotional scene depicting the ballet dancers of the Udmurt Na-

tional Theatre dancing disco to an archaic Udmurt folksong tune against the background of a large Pepsi Cola ad.

The two young researchers, Liis Ruussaar, the postgraduate student of the Estonian Institute of Humanities, and Kristel Kaljund, the doctorate of the Munich University, have not included the academic viewpoint on the identity issues of the Udmurts. Therefore I would like to discuss the views of two Udmurt and two Russian ethnologists.

Mikhail Atamanov, doctor of philosophy, government expert at the Izhevsk Patriarchy and senior researcher at the Udmurt National University, has studied an intriguing and archaic manifestation of the local identity of the Udmurts – namely, the division of traditional community into the *vorsud*-tribal groups (Atamanov 2001). Presently he is translating the Bible into the Udmurt language, aiming to introduce the world culture among the Udmurts.

Professor of ethnography at the Udmurt National University, Vladimir Vladykin has studied in Moscow, like Yuri Vella, and writes extremely interesting poetry inspired by folklore. Professor of Uralic Studies of the Hamburg University, Eugen Helimski has recently commented on Vladykin's *The Religious-Mythological Worldview of the Udmurts* (Vladykin 1994): according to him, Vladykin has somewhat facetiously linked the Udmurt nature religion to the pantheon of ancient cultures. This sounds very familiar, as Uku Masing has quite similarly criticised Oskar Loorits' approach to the Estonian folk religion (Masing 1989).

Currently the head of the Chair of Ethnology at the Moscow University, Vladimir Pimenov has written a traditional ethnographic article about the Veps. His next research topic was the Udmurts, but their culture did not comply with the traditional research method, so, in 1977 Pimenov inculcated a new statistical-ethnographical research method (Pimenov 1977). It was a major step in the theoretical ethnology in Russia, but at the same rendered the conceptualising of the traditional Udmurt culture impossible.

The increasing interest of Russian ethnologists in the Udmurts is now fostered by Mikhail Guboglo, deputy director of the Miklukho-Maklai Institute of Ethnology, who is the chief editor of the six-volume collective monograph *Phenomenon of Udmurtia* (Guboglo



Photo 2. In the documentary “Päikeselapsed” the professional Udmurt Shaman Yuri Kutshyran admits being, in fact, an Orthodox (<http://www.suri.ee/klubi/paike.html>).

& Smirnova 2001, 2002). This suggests that the active interest in the Udmurts is not just the endemic “disease” of the Estonian scholars.

Although the study by Ruussaar and Kaljundi is comparable to that of V. Pimenov in its standard questionnaire method, the long interviews prompted by the questionnaires do not rule out further studies into the traditional worldview of the Udmurts. At the moment it is too early to say, whether and why the Udmurt culture has to globalise. Perhaps the global culture needs such non-globalising cultures for its own survival? All the problems associated with the conceptualising of the Udmurt and other cultures in literary language and the electronic world suggest that the conceptualisation systems represented by these means of expression are clearly imperfect. For an oral indigenous culture literary language is like a dysfunctional artificial limb, the use of which is not considered on someone else’s recommendation but when necessity rises.

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