Solo improvisations of the Northern Udmurts: to the problem of genre

To the Northern Udmurt musical tradition, which has some features close to the Komis and the Ob-Ugrians, belongs a wonderful phenomenon of traditional culture – the ritual polyphonic improvisational tunes krež / kərzən / golos. These tunes are mainly sung during family and clan rituals (wedding, burial rites, seeing off a soldier going to military service, guest rites) by a great number of participants (up to 20–25 persons), every one of them conducting his/her own melody and text.

Our attention is attracted by one of the ritual improvisations – the so-called kurekjaškon / kət kurekton golos 'sorrowful / soul-grieving tune'. Its specific feature is its twofold function: 1) in collective polyphonic performance at ritual occasions, 2) in the individual performance at non-ritual occasions.

For the first time this genre was mentioned in the Glazov district at the end of the 19th century by the Russian collector of folklore N. Pervukhin. Enumerating a series of "similar but not utterly identical" tunes of the local tradition, Pervukhin mentioned the sorrowful tune kət kurekton krež and tried to translate its name more precisely as "stomach tearing, soul catching". According to him, the mentioned tunes are performed by "a chorus of male and female voices". Pervukhin also sketches some comparative characteristics of the Northern Udmurt polyphony: "the musical part of every voice is more individual than it is usually in the choral songs of the Russian people. Also the very lamentations, which are performed by a single person among Russians, the Udmurts perform in chorus, with a soloist merely joining in the performance. The main person begins every new line or couplet in solo and the others enter as the phrase of the couplet becomes clear for them. The soloist sings all his/her words in full voice (forte) and the chorus sings in moderato (evidently the author meant mezzo forte – I. N.) or even piano". (Pervukhin 1888, 40–41.)

Other scholars, like the ethnologist B. Gavrilov and I. K. Travina, the specialist in the song cultures of the northern peoples, have also studied Northern Udmurt song, but they do not mention the solo performance of the krež / golos tunes, though the tradition of the solo improvisation was apparently developed enough in other song genres, too, as especially in the hunters' and bee-keepers' muš u'ton gur 'bee keeping tune', ūr kuto n 'marten hunting', konj kuto n gur 'squirrel hunting tune'. These genres were reported to be still in active use in the central and in some southern regions of Udmurtia in the 1930's.
The existence of the non-ritual solo improvisation in the Northern Udmurt song tradition was for the first time noted by the Udmurt scholar M. G. Khodyreva. She published five tunes veškät/vešak krež ('song for all cases of life') in solo and ensemble performance and defined all these tunes as personal songs (Khodyreva 1996, 70–72; 94–95). She characterized these songs as having typically free improvisational structure, an introvert, "only-for-myself" performance and autobiographic contents.

Naturally, one is intrigued to know, why the genre of allegedly ancient personal song, having genetic and typological parallels in many Arctic and Finno-Ugrian traditions, was discovered in the Udmurt culture only at the very end of the 20th century? What is the origin of this genre and its history? What is similar and what is different between the Udmurt personal songs and the Ob-Ugrian songs of destiny and or Sami and Samoyed individual song improvisations? Unfortunately, many of these questions cannot be answered now due to the lack of material. However, it can be concluded on the basis of fieldwork experience that the genre of personal song among the Udmurts really has very ancient roots, which can be assumed due to its wide distribution, from the compositional structure of tunes and texts and from its typological and genetical parallels.

The preservation of the personal songs in the agricultural context of the Udmurts is a peculiar fact worth special attention. Also, the long absence of these songs from the scholarly consciousness is connected with subjective and objective reasons. The establishing of this genre in research was impeded first of all by its twofold existence: the polyphonic one, embedded in the system of other ritual krež improvisations from one side, and the individual – which sometimes was apparently not noticed by the collectors – from the other.

Moreover, the documentation of the solo improvisations, where the soul of the Udmurt singer, reticent and rigorous in everyday situations, is laid bare, demands a special personal contact between the collector and performer. Almost all the personal song tunes we recorded were interrupted due to loud sobbing of the singer going through the most sorrowful moments of his/her life. The collection is also complicated by the fact that the genre of "sorrowful" improvisations may be called by different names in different places: ket kurekton, kurekjaškon, veškät/vešak krež or its name may sometimes coincide with that of funeral and repast tunes: šej kel’an, vaton golos. This polymorphic generic appearance of the song type results, to our mind, from the same theme: the improvisation is always an occasion for expressing sorrowful emotions.

The texts are as a rule autobiographical and, according to the genre rules, are created during the performance. There is actually no coherent account of particular events, but a chain of separate emotional explosions, exhibitions of consciousness, when the memory reveals an episode of the life. These short semantic episodes alternate with the refrain words – interjections, particles and separate words, which do as a rule form the main contents of krež.
The most difficult is the problem of genre definition, since folk etymology, while completely and precisely representing the emotional essence of the tune (sad, sorrowful), does not and cannot point to its function and place in the folklore genre system. The most appropriate could be the definition given by M. G. Khodyreva—"personal song"—because the tune and the text being created at the moment of performance does belong to only one author, as the singer is recalling episodes from his/her own life.

However, in contrast to the solo improvisations, the collective performance of the "sorrowful tunes" does not have such a personal character, mainly due to the absence of the semantically relevant insertions. Moreover, the melody part of every singer is subordinated to the order of common singing and the role of improvisation is much reduced. The emotional outburst in solo performances and very often absence of any semantically relevant text in the collective do not allow the "sorrowful tune" to be ascribed epic song improvisations, either, although some elements of this genre are present here, especially when the author, feeling that his/her death is near, leaves his/her personal song as a memorial for his/her relatives.

Finally, is it possible to consider the "sorrowful tunes" as lamentations? As was already said, real recording of the solo improvisations did not end with laments. The lament on a person's bad destiny in the "sorrowful tune" is similar to the wedding and, funeral lamentations; we documented complete coincidences of these two genres (the "sorrowful" and funeral in the Yar district). However, there remains a very slight border: the lament in the bride's recitations and funeral lamentation is one of the main genre indication connected apparently first of all with the mythological consciousness (death - revival), the lament in "sorrowful tune" is a pure psychoemotional relaxation, a catharsis by means of tears. Thus, the question on the genre affiliation of the "sorrowful tunes" remains to be investigated - as well as many other questions connected with this wonderful phenomenon of Udmurt folklore.
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Example 1.

kurekjaškon krež
Perf. by Klavdiya Andreevna Bazhenova, (b. 1930), Verkhnye Parzi, Glazov district.
TRANSLATION:

Oh, how I’ll live to my death, I am saying,
Who will be a helper, who’ll be a burgler,
Oh, I am saying.

If (we had been) born a little bit earlier! Now it began to be already late,
Why has this bad life fallen to us!

We didn’t see a good life, no proper clothes, not enough food,
Oh, with this soul
What to do, how to stand it all?

Why we had no occasion to live in a human way, why, I am saying,
We wanted to go to study somewhere, but we were not given the choice,
[How much we did work, as if] we wanted to cut the whole forest down.

Our bright world, our life was a forest, only the roads were left in the dark,
I did not see anything [good], but that what I saw and experienced... [singer breaks into tears]
Got, got, got, oh, I am saying, am I,
Oh, I did say, oh my soul,
My world was left, was left,
Oh, I did say, I did say, oh, I am saying, oh I have to say,
Nothing was left, can I
Bear it, [however is it necessary to] stand it.
Why were we born into this life, into this world, why we as if keep borning here, our people,
As if why.
Our grief, our sorrow nobody understands, nobody knows about
I have been thinking how it was, the [work in the] forest will end, the building of the road (will end), but
why,
We had to be born into that particular time,
Oh, why, oh, why, oh, why?

Example 2.

kurekjaškon gološ
Perf. by Aleksandra Gavrilovna Veretennikova (1903–1999), Verkhnye Parzi, Glazov district.
Irina Nurieva

godi godi šuome meda la gine (je) no ok-a meda je no
e-ya meda gine je no
e-vu d e je no
r amjston kui i n ares ug ni mon no ben oge je no vina no juiisko uk
tečaško no kirjaško no mađško no uk
kof mar kariško pinal no vožmaš ko ug no
kjičož meda mon ulo uk ukmjston-a meda šu-a meda ulo ares ug no
pinaľ'ı osjleš no-a meda vičaksleš mon miľ'o ug ben uge no
mon ben tašamie ben uge kje ke vordi ug l'e tašaleš no ug
of'i jn je lujsal ož ik vortsal uk
pinalze no oke no
vičakez mjnam pinaľ'ı osj odik kaľ uk ben poto no
šergej no žal' pote uk
šergejelen no pinaľ'ı osjz žal' poto uk
tajosjz no žal' poto ug no
duńše orčiz uk mal meda uk peřešmi mon uk ben uk kuiiň pinal mon vordi no
odigze no mon prijute no ej źot uge no
šul no kal vordi uk pinaľ'ı osme no uge no
mone uk ben ţatţiŋ no možot uz liktele no vičaksj no ben no
olokőži ţatoža ben uk
oje ke pjj no uge (okmoz).

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Translation:

Gody, gody, we only say, oh, hey,
Hey, only, hey,
Hey, hey.
I am already eighty-three, still drinking wine,
Dancing, singing, and while singing I tell,
I still do everything, I look after children.
How long will I still live – till ninety or till one hundred years?
Don’t I become unnecessary for my all children?
[Hope I don’t have to be left alone without all my children],
Once I gave birth to my [daughter] Tanya,
If I was there, I’d have given birth to
Children as well.
All my children seem to be equal for me,
Only Sergey I pity,
I pity Sergey’s children,
These [children] I also pity.
My life, my world is already gone, why I did grow old, I gave birth to three children,
Not even one I did give to an orphanage.
Laboriously I have gave birth to and raised my children,
Perhaps nobody will come to bury me,
I don’t know, how I’ll be buried,
Oh, oh, if, as if, oh... (this is enough)

Literature