

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 / kęržan / 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 / kęt 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 *ķęt 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 ut'on gur* 'bee keeping tune', *šer kuton* 'marten hunting', *koņį kuton 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 *veškĭt / 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*, *veškĭt / 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.

Example 1.

kurekjaškon krež

Perf. by Klavdiya Andreevna Bazhenova, (b. 1930), Verkhnye Parzi, Glazov district.

J = 70 *dl = fl*

e ben ki-šj me-da ku-lj-šoz me-da ben ug u-lo-no šu-is-ko uk ben uk.
 kin pij me-da jur-tj - šez no lu-oz kin ya-tj-sez no.
 e šu-is-ko uk ben u-ge.
 š - žit ke no ya-žen-ges ben vorts-ko-no vj-lem uk ben uk a - šj ber-ges-a val no ben.
 ma-lj me - da ta mi pij ta-še u-rod u-lon šo-rij ben uk.
 še -dim uk ben ug no uk.
 jos-kaš ben uk vel-le-mez no (X)š-maš-že diš-ku - tez no kęł tj-ro - nez no (X)š-maš-že jos - kaš.
 oj ben kjc-cj me - da ben uk ta pij kę -tez uk.
 po-no-no ki-šj me-da ši-da-no ug no.
 ma-lj me-da ka-lj kat pij u -lj -nj eš kıl - dį uk ma-lj me - da šu-iš - ko no ben.
 kot kjc - cj no diš eš-kj-nj no mįn val no mi-lem vo-la ej val uk.
 o-diğ bač-ča-jez gi-ne bič-tj-nj me-dim ug no.
 mi - lam ju - git dur-ne-mj ben uk bač-ča-da šu-res da gi-ne val no kį - še-da ug ben uk.
 no-mir ej aš-že aš-že -mez...

e ben kǰǰi meda kulǰččoǰ meda ben ug ulono šuiško uk ben uk
kin pij meda jurtǰšez no luoz kin ǰatǰšez no
e šuiško uk ben uge
ǰžit ke no ǰaǰenges ben vortskono vǰlem uk ben uk aǰi berges-a val no ben
malǰ meda ta mi pij tače urod ulon šorǰ ben uk
šedǰ im uk ben ug no uk
joskadǰ ben uk vetlemez no (x)ǰem aǰže dǰiskutez no ketǰ tǰronez no (x)ǰem aǰže joskadǰ
oj ben kǰccǰ meda ben uk ta pij ketez uk
ponono kǰǰi meda čidano ug no
malǰ meda kalǰk kaǰ pij ulǰnǰ ǰs kǰldǰ uk malǰ meda šuiško no ben
koǰ kǰccǰ no dǰš etskǰnǰ no mǰn val no miǰ em voǰ a ǰj val uk
odig čaččajez gine bǰttǰnǰ medim ug no
miǰ am jugǰt duǰnǰemǰ ben uk čačča da šures da gine val no kǰče da ug ben uk
nomǰr(e) ǰj aǰžǰ aǰžemez no... (berde)

got got got oj ben-a meda oǰǰi-ǰa meda šuiško no
e šui uk ben uk žaneme ben
duǰnǰeje uk ben uk kǰǰ iz uk kǰǰ iz uk ben ug no uge
oj šui uk šui no (x)e šuiško uk ben uge oj meda-ǰa šuono
ǰveǰ meda kǰǰi meda
čidano uk ben kǰǰi meda uk čidanǰ kule uk ben uk
malǰ meda pij ben mi duǰnǰeje pij vortskǰliškemmǰ miǰ eštǰm ben uge
maǰǰ ke pij nokin no
ketǰožmes uk ben ug no vala ug no toǰǰ uk ben no
šo kožaško val uk nǰles no bǰros šures lešton no malǰ meda mi ben uk pij
so šorǰ ben vortskono
luiškemmǰ uk (x)ej malǰ (x)ej malǰ (x)ej malǰ uk ben ug no.

Translation:

*Oh, how I'll live to my death, I am saying,
Who will be a helper, who'll be a buryer,
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.

$\text{♩} = 90 \quad \text{♩}^{\flat} = \text{A}$

go - di go - di šu-o - me me - da la gi - ne no ok - a me - da je no
 e - va me - da gi - ne je no
 e - vu de je no
 ta-miš-ton kyi-A a - res ug ni mon no ben o - ge je no vi - na no ju - is - ko uk
 teč - čas - ko - no kpr - čas - ko no ma - džis - ko no uk
 kol - mar ka - riš - ko pi - nal no voz - mas - ko fu / g no
 kijč - tož me - da mon u - lo uk uk - miš - ton - a me - da šu - a me - da u - lo a - res ug no
 pi - nal - lo - sj - leš no - a me - da vi - čak - sj - leš
 mon mi - lo ug ben u - ge - no
 mon ben ta - na - me ben u - ge kfi / če ke vor - di ug le ta - na - leš no ug

ot-i-jjn ke lu-fjsal ož ik vortsal uk
 pi-nal-ze no o-ke no
 vi-čakez mj-nam pi-nal-lo-sj o-dik kať uk ben po-to no, šer-gej no žal po-te uk
 šer-gej-e-len no pi-nal-lo-sj žal po-to uk
 ta-jo-sjz no žal po-to ug no
 duń-ne or-čiz uk mal me-da uk pe-řeš-mi mon uk ben uk kuńn pi-nal mon vord-i no
 o-dig-ze no mon pri-ju-te no ej šot u-ge no
 šul no kal vor-di uk pi-nal-foš-me no u-ge no
 mo-ne uk ben ũ-tj-nj no mo-žot uz ljik-te-le no vi-čak-sj no ben no
 o-lo-ke-sj ũ-to-zę ben uk
 o-je ke pij no u-ge

godi godi šuome meda la gine (je) no ok-a meda je no
 e-ũa meda gine je no
 e-vu đ e je no
 ř amjston kuńn ares ug ři mon no ben oge je no vina no juisko uk
 teččaško no kjržaško no mađ jško no uk
 koť mar kariško pinal no voźmaš ko ug no
 kjččoź meda mon ulo uk ukmjston-a meda šu-a meda ulo ares ug no
 pinal ř ošjleš no-a meda vičaksjleš mon mjř o ug ben uge no
 mon ben tańame ben uge kjče ke vordi ug ř e tańaleš no ug
 oť ijjn ke lujsal ož ik vortsal uk
 pinalze no oke no
 vičakez mjnam pinal ř osj odik kať uk ben poto no
 šergej no žal pote uk
 šergejelen no pinal ř osj žal poto uk
 tajosjz no žal poto ug no
 duńne orčiz uk mal meda uk peřešmi mon uk ben uk kuńn pinal mon vordi no
 odigze no mon prijute no ej šot uge no
 šul no kal vordi uk pinal ř osme no uge no
 mone uk ben ũtjnj no možot uz ljiktele no vičaksj no ben no
 olokâžj ũtozâ ben uk
 oje ke pij no uge (okmoz).

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

- Gavrilov B. 1880. *Proizvedeniya narodnoy slovesnosti, obryady i poverya votyakov Kazanskoy i Vyatskoy guberniy*. Kazan'.
- Khodyreva M. G. 1996. *Pesni severnykh udmurtov*, vyp. 1. (udmurtskiy fol'klor). Izhevsk.
- Pervukhin N. 1888. *Eskizy predaniy i byta inorodtsev Glazovskogo uezda*. Eskiz 111. Vyatka.
- Travina I. K. 1964. *Udmurtskie narodnye pesni*. Izhevsk.