

The Concept of a Clean and Unclean Body – an Example of Udmurts

Tatiana Minniyakhmetova

Institute for History and European Ethnology, University of Innsbruck, Austria

Abstract: The article examines the poly-semantic concept of cleanliness in traditional Udmurt practices in respect to religious, ritualized and daily life, focusing on the definite object of a human body. The idea of cleanliness is directly connected with the notion of purity. The “unclean” or “dirty” body is a symbolic phenomenon, and its semantics can be revealed in context. Cleanliness is an important virtue, and maintaining the cleanliness of a body is not an individual but a controlled common social duty. In the tradition of the Udmurts, the sauna was and still is a very important part of daily and ritual life. It is understood that in the sauna one is cleaned physically and spiritually. The act of bathing in the sauna means also purifying morally. Special cleansing and purifying regulations are required before calendrical and commemorative rituals. The sauna also has a role in rituals connected to birth and death. The article gives a brief survey of several rituals around the notion of cleanliness and purity.

Keywords: Bodily hygiene, ritual washing, healing traditions, Udmurts

The concept of cleanliness differs in each culture, and it is deeply rooted in tradition and not changing easily and completely. In this article I attempt to examine some ideas on cleanliness in the traditional Udmurtian conceptions, focusing on the definite object of a human body.¹ Furthermore, I will consider the modifications of the notion of cleanliness and treatment of it today. As for traditions, I mean the traditions and habits of rural inhabitants, the lifestyle in the countryside, considering that cleanliness must be examined within its cultural, social and historical context (ELIAS 1992).

In the Udmurt tradition, concepts of cleanliness in respect to religious, ritualized and daily life is poly-semantically related to the notion of a clean and unclean body.

In the Udmurt language “clean” is *chylkyt*; at the same time, this word has also meanings of “healthy,” “beautiful/pretty/handsome/attractive (about one’s appearance),”

¹ I have done extensive field work among the Udmurts in Udmurtia, Bashkiria, Tataria, Perm Krai, Kirov and Sverdlovsk Oblasts, Siberia. I had conducted more than 70 field researches and expeditions in all seasons and had interviewed thousands of respondents. I was born in an Udmurt village (Bajsadü) in Baskortostan. As a native I am at the same time a researcher of my own culture.

“comfort/order” (in a space), and “clear/fine/evident.” Furthermore, the notion *chylkyt* also defines “purity,” which includes moral and physical purity and cleanness. “Unclean” is *kyrs’*, *kurmem* (dial.: *kyrmem*), *s’öd/s’ödekmem*, *saptas’kem*, *sachyrmem*, *pychyarak* (dial.).

Keeping the cleanliness is observing it both in everyday life and in ritual practice, including the ritual periods during the calendar year and family ceremonies, as well as the occasional rites. The requirements and standards for controlling cleanliness are also manifested concerning a human body, which should also be kept clean. Sustaining cleanliness may be carried out in various ways.

In general, in the tradition of the Udmurts, the main role in washing, cleaning and cleansing of a body is played by a sauna. The sauna was and still is a very important part of daily and ritual life. Usually at a minimum every Thursday, a family takes a steam bath and dresses up in clean clothes; as a rule, they use a bundle of birch twigs with fresh leaves in summer or dried leaves in winter (in some local traditions, in addition to birch they also use oak and conifers), and wash with soap or other detergents in the sauna.

Taking a bath in the sauna is a ritual action; it is not accidental that in the Udmurt language this activity is called *muncho(e) pyron* (literally: “entering into a sauna”); similar definitions are connected with other sacral rituals like *Kualae pyron*, *Lude pyron*, *vöse pyron* (very briefly, the component *pyron* means the action of “entering,” which was accompanied by a special ritual behaviour of all participants, and hence the ceremony came to mean “worshipping/praying/performing” the rite in *Kuala*, *Lud*, *vös*, etc.² Not coincidentally, the Udmurt scholar Kuzebay Gerd convincingly argued in his study that bathing in a sauna is the place of performance of a rite, focusing on its symbolism and purification functions (GERD 1993:43, 61–62). In fact, one’s behaviour in the sauna among the Udmurts still proves this thesis today.

Every time before heating the sauna, the water vessels should be washed and filled with fresh water. Before bathing, the sauna should be cleaned; this means, the floor, bench, bathing platform should be cleaned and washed, and the washing utensils should be rinsed with fresh water. All these procedures should be repeated after the bath, too.

Bathing in a sauna has a definite goal. As a rule, today, as in the past, it is very important to take a bath before any traditional ritual ceremony and festive days in the folk and official calendars; one follows these rules before wedding ceremonies, recruiting, birthdays and other parties, or before the send-off of visiting relatives. One of the main procedures in the sauna is the bathing with the birch twigs. First, one sprinkles water on the pile of rocks and at the same time addresses it to the forthcoming ritual or event, expressing one’s wishes about how the ritual/event should be held and accomplish its goals; afterwards, one gently slaps the body with the twigs. The weekly bathing on Thursdays is connected with making mention of the deceased ancestors: this means, while sprinkling water on the pile of rocks, one addresses it to the departed, and only after this does one proceed to the washing of the body. I accentuate such moral order to emphasize that even an ordinary washing includes purifying acts and it means some kind of fulfilment and performance of traditional duties dedicated to the cleansing ceremony in general.

Special cleansing and purifying regulations are required before calendrical commemorative rituals and rituals dedicated to dead ancestors. During the calendar

² For more about this definition, see: MINNIYAKHMETOVA 2008:86.

rituals, bathing activities in the sauna are connected with death in general. Before the commemoration of a dead person on the third, seventh and fortieth days and one year after death, the bathing is addressed first of all to this person, secondly to the last departed one, and afterwards to all dead relatives, and then to the ancestors in general. Usually it is common regulation in the sauna that some water in a vessel and birch twigs should be prepared and left for the departed. This is done because people believe that the dead relatives are here in the sauna and doing the same things and behaving as the living, or that the departed will come to the sauna and wash themselves after the living did it. The living consider the presence of the departed in the sauna, and while sprinkling water on the pile of rocks, they ask the dead to be careful of the hot steam. As we see, in the sauna, one cleans himself thoroughly following and respecting the traditional regulations; at the same time, one communicates with ancestors and “cares” for them, thereby escaping all danger deriving from the departed. In general, it is understood that in the sauna one is cleaned physically and spiritually. Since the danger coming from the dead and the “other world” represents the real dirtiness for these folk, they need to prevent the harm and keep it off.

Here it is clearly observable that the act of bathing in the sauna means also purifying physically and morally. And what is more, the idea of cleanliness is directly connected with the notion of purity; this also signifies that one cannot be clean in an unclean or dirty space, i.e., the concept of cleanliness includes also having a clean space in one’s habitation. Furthermore, this means an interconnectedness and interrelation of notions, and hence a coherence of activities and their expected results. This idea provokes and favours cleansing and purifying activities on any working day, but especially before rituals and during the ritualistic period. Traditionally on Thursday a house should be cleaned, the tablecloth and towels replaced with fresh ones, the dishes washed, and afterwards the family takes a bath in the sauna (see above about this custom). These activities mean the preparation for the forthcoming Friday, the sacred day of the week.

It is standard practice that all surrounding spaces should be kept up properly and cleaned from time to time, otherwise the unclean space may be settled by evil spirits and ailments; one says “*zhin-perios intyjas’kozy*” (lit.: “devils/demons will settle down”) or “*cher-churyos ilashozy*” (lit.: “sicknesses/diseases will gain this space”). Such a space is called *kyrs’* or *kyrmem*; it is likely that this notion is derived from *kyr* “wild,” “wildness;” this space in the homestead is no longer like the actual existing space, which, in turn, means unclean, dirty, dangerous. If this space will be needed for some purpose, it should be cleaned and purified before use.

The notion of cleanliness gets a special sense and significance in religious life and ritual practice, when people attribute high importance to all cleansing and purifying acts and ceremonies. These activities are clearly set forth in the folk calendar. Cleaning of a body for ritual purposes means to be clean in the broad sense; washing, cleansing and purification before the sacred ritual period represents meaningful and poly-semantic activities. For example, before the Great Day, one uses the birch twigs and herbs especially prepared for this purpose in summer, or one bathes the body with “silver water” – *azves’vu*, (i.e., one drops some silver coins in a vessel with water and then uses this water for bathing and rinsing the body); one dresses up in the ritual clothes washed beforehand and uses amulets prepared especially for this purpose; and one cleans and smokes all surrounding space. These ritual cleansing acts include the cutting of nails and hair, shaving the beard, and for women putting up their hair.



Figure 1. Bundles for kids and adults, Kassiyarovo village, Buraevo district, Bashkiria 2016. (Photo by Tatiana Minniyakhmetova)



Figure 2. Storehouse, Kassiyarovo village, Buraevo district, Bashkiria 2016. (Photo by Tatiana Minniyakhmetova)



Figure 3. A small girl in a sauna, Vukogurt village, Tatyshly district, Bashkiria 2016. (Photo by A. Baydullina)

At liminal periods in a year, or at critical turning points in the calendar, when during the nights malicious and harmful spirits rise and reign, people pay serious attention to protecting themselves and the space around them (about these customs see: MINNIAKHMETOVA 2000; GLUKHOVA 2002; LINTROP 2005). In the mentioned periods, one may “become dangerous” for others even by just being outdoors, especially if it happens at the sunset and at midnight.

There is a custom to pick up plants in the early morning on the 14th of May; these herbs will be dried and used during the whole year. Along with some other purposes, these plants will be used for cleaning the body in the sauna, when the bathing is done in preparation for the Great Day rituals and festivities; some strong smelling plants will be used to smoke the surrounding ritual space to purify it.

In earlier times, the Udmurts had a *tuno*, a person with shamanic abilities, a diviner who could recognize those who were not properly cleansed before taking part in the ritual in the sacred place; those unclean ones were turned away from the religious ceremony. Evidently such occasions verify the idea of an extreme significance of cleanliness and purity in general. At the same time, in spite of all regulations, it has occurred repeatedly that one was not properly prepared for the religious event. Because of such reasons, one lost all rights to take part in the ceremony and was banned from attending until the next ritual, or even until the next year. This shows a new problem of neglect by some community members, which could be remedied if one would be cleaned properly

according to the customary rules. Most likely this case could be examined as one of moral cleanliness or uncleanliness.

How are a new-born and its mother regarded and understood as clean after birth and birthing? There are many customs concerning caring for a new-born. In the past, delivery took place in the sauna or in the female part of the house; after delivery, the new-born's body was washed with salt water using sheep fleece. It is a common belief among all ethnic groups in the Volga-Ural region of Russia that during the 40 days following the birth, a new-born and a woman recently confined are unclean, and this period is also considered as unclean and dangerous. Of course, there are special rituals and other activities aimed at protecting those who are "unclean" and those who are in contact with the "unclean." Thus, there is a custom called "three saunas," *kuin' muncho*: after delivery, the new-born and its mother go to the sauna and take a bath. It is strictly regulated to bathe at least three times in the three days after giving birth. For this purpose, the family prepares special, small birch twigs for the baby – *pichi/nuny/bebej venik*. During the "three saunas" period, the new-born is bathed with those birch twigs. And regular bathing is required during the next 40-day period, too, even if not every day, but every second or third day. There are also prayers and worship rituals devoted to the kinship progenitors, gods and spirits; performing these strengthens the stability of the family and the kinship organization in general, and makes the environment pure once again, eliminating danger in the living space.

Socialization of a new-born is a step-by-step process. The baby is considered a member of a society upon the expiration of the forty days' period since its birth, when it is clear that its body had physically grown and got stronger: then the baby may be clothed in dresses instead of swaddling cloth, given a name, and admitted as a new member into the family. Another belief holds that during the 40-day period the new-born's soul is only on the crown of its head, and the child is regarded as human only when its soul "implants" in its body. But all this is just the first step in the long process of socialization of a new-born. With every step, the danger for the family is weakening and the stability strengthening.

Here we once more come to the idea that uncleanliness can be dangerous, and that uncleanliness is connected with temporal dimensions.

The time-limit and strict rules are also adhered to in the 40-day period after one's death. The corpse is washed and dressed in clean clothes, since the deceased is being "sent off" to the other world and must be clean. But this time period is also considered as harmful, and one needs to follow special regulations. It is believed that for forty days the soul of the departed is in the world of the living and one may come across the dead. The danger coming from the deceased may transfer onto any living person during "contact" with death, and this person will be "dirty" afterwards and dangerous for the living. To be protected, everyone keeps amulets on them and in their clothes or in their pockets; after any kind of contact with death, such as visiting the departed for taking leave of the dead, participating in the funeral ceremony and commemoration rituals, or visiting a cemetery, one may attract danger and therefore should get clean. Usually in such cases people wash their hands with water or rub them with ash, take a bath in a sauna, touch a stove in the house, or use fire and smoke.

There are some regulations concerning women who are considered to be dirty. A woman is "dirty" during the forty days after giving birth and during the periods of

menses (“menses” in Udmurt is *saptas’kon*, that means “getting dirty”), when “their bodily boundaries were open” (ANTTONEN 2005:194) and may represent danger for others, and it is strictly forbidden to take part in the religious events, use ritual items, prepare ritual food, and bake bread. The above mentioned regulations are socially controlled and observed. But another kind of blood can play a very positive role in the customs and rituals aimed at creation and reestablishment.

As it was mentioned above, *chylkyt* also means “healthy.” Today, as in the past, all kinds of diseases and ailments represent danger and dirtiness, and one cannot escape disease with just the usual washing and cleaning of a body. There are a lot of means in folk medicine to get out of illnesses; for instance, for the treatment of some ailments, people use herbs, plants and other folk therapeutic substances in the sauna. In the past, one of the prominent roles in these activities was played the above-mentioned *tuno* (BOGAYEVSKIY 1890:125–126; VLADYKINA 2002). Contact with any ill person can pollute and harm others, therefore purification is needed.

The notion of *chylkyt* also characterizes one’s appearance; analyses of appearance, like well-set, with regular features, good stature and countenance, emphasize the physical appearance in general, which means some kind of perfection of a body. Similar definitions may be used about the order and comfort in a space, in Udmurt also called *chylkyt*. By the same notion, *chylkyt* also characterizes the sacred place/space when it is kept clean and has not been defiled. Perhaps this is an idea through which humans have tried to comprehend and create beauty, order and perfection as a whole.

The concept of a clean and an unclean body is clearly observed in the cosmology, mythology, and ritual practice of the Udmurts.

There is an interesting topic found in the cosmogonic or etiologic myth of the Udmurts: at the beginning of the world, or the origin of the universe, the earth and the sky were very close to each other. Once a woman laid the dirty napkins stained by her child on the sky to dry. The sky was insulted by this, and it moved away from the earth. According to this myth, we see that uncleanliness played a significant role in the creation of the world. Uncleanliness may destroy the world order; this thesis is also confirmed by ritual regulations, as we see in the instance of unclean members of the community not being able to take part in the rituals.

According to folklore, human origins, as well as coming into being, are connected with water. But one’s life also comes to an end and transforms into the natural substances staying in water, as we see in the following folk song:

“Eh, my body, my body, you will turn into fish-scale!
 Eh, my arm-beads, my arm-beads, you will turn into fish-roe!
 Eh, my hands-legs, you will turn into brushwood!
 Eh, my hair, my hair, you will turn into seaweed!
 Eh, my body, my body, you will turn into soil!” (GERD 1927:59)

These transformations may represent the concept of travelling a path into the “other world,” which is obviously a water/river in the traditional Udmurt worldview.

Proceeding from these ideas, it might be concluded that a body itself cannot be dirty, a concept confirmed by the following Udmurt tradition: according to a springtime custom, when a peasant, a male, ploughed a plot of his field for the first time in that year, he

would take off his trousers and sit naked on the ground. Of course his body was washed in the sauna beforehand. But this custom indicates that if a body as a notion in general were considered dirty, it would be not possible to perform this act.

I would like to advance an idea here: in the 40-day period after one's birth and the 40-day period after one's death, the danger does not originate from a new-born and a woman recently confined or from their bodies, as their bodies are cleaned right there,³ or from the dead, as the corpse is also washed and cleaned; the so-called uncleanliness and dirtiness is the effect and consequence of the open boundaries between the worlds, and it represents the liminal status of the spatial and temporal dimensions which are becoming dangerous and risky for the living.

In everyday life, there is no notion of a "dirty" body. One never says "my body is dirty," but one can say "my body is sweaty," and the sweaty body will not be interpreted as an unclean and dangerous body. A body may be "unclean" in special situations, such as after one's death and at some critical periods of time during the year, or for females after giving birth and at the time of menses, as it was analysed above. So, the body itself is not dirty, only parts of the body, like the face, hands, legs, can be stained, smeared, get dirty, which is called "covered with dirt or soiled" and it does not represent any danger. In such cases, one does not need to be cleaned and purified ritually; it is enough to wash those parts of the body. The clean body means healthy, beautiful, pretty/handsome, tidy, well and strongly formed, fit-looking. The examples and concepts examined above suggest that the "unclean" or "dirty" body is a symbolic phenomenon, and its semantics can be revealed in context.

Thus, cleanliness is an important virtue, and maintaining the cleanliness of a body is not an individual duty but social and common, controlled by those "trying to influence one another's behaviour" (DOUGLAS 1988:3); it is an indication of striving to keep the world's stability and order (LEHTINEN 2015:419). Concepts of cleanliness may differ from society to society and across time in the same society. The idea of a clean and unclean body bears great importance in the Udmurtian tradition, and it represents the broader notion of cleanliness as a kind of common aspiration and effort to move toward some ideals. Cleanliness is social power, one of the symbolic representations of the identity of the community and the individuals.

REFERENCES CITED

ANTTONEN, Veiko

2005 Space, Body, and the Notion of Boundary. A Category-Theoretical Approach to Religion. *Temenos* 41(2):185–201.

BOGAYEVSKIY, Pyotr Mikhaylovich

1890 Ocherki religioznykh predstavleniy votyakov [Essays on Religious Beliefs of the Votyaks]. *Etnograficheskoye obozreniye* 4(1):116–163.

³ Actually it is a kind of separation of the wild nature (MAZALOVA 2001:119).

- DOUGLAS, Mary
1988 *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London – New York: Routledge.
- ELIAS, Norbert
1992 *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und psychogenetische Untersuchungen*. Vol. II. *Wandlungen der Gesellschaft. Entwurf zu einer Theorie der Zivilisation*. (17. Aufl.) Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- GERD, Kuzebay
1927 *Udmurt kyržan»yos* [Udmurt Folk Songs]. Izhkar: Udkniga.
1993 *Chelovek i yego rozhdeniye u vostochnykh finnov* [The Human and Birth at the Eastern Finns]. Helsinki: Société Finno-Ougrienne. (Mémoires de la Société Finno-Ougrienne 217.)
- GLUKHOVA, Galina
2002 *Simvolika ryazhen'ya v traditsionnoy kul'ture udmurtov* [The Symbolism of Masking in the Traditional Culture of the Udmurts]. PhD thesis. Izhevsk: УдГУ.
- LEHTINEN, Ildikó
2015 Cleanliness as a part of Mari mentality. In MANTILA, Harry – SIVONEN, Jari – BRUNNI, Sisko – LEINONEN, Kaisa – PALVIAINEN, Santeri (eds) *Congressus Duodecimus Internationalis Fenno-Ugristarum, Oulu 2015. Book of Abstracts*, 417–418. University of Oulu: Juvenes Print. https://tuhat.helsinki.fi/portal/files/49675774/CIFU12_BookOfAbstracts.pdf (accessed September 20, 2015)
- LINTROP, Aado
2005 Liminal Periods in the Udmurt Ritual Year. In MIFSUD-CHIRCOP, George (ed) *First International Conference of the SIEF Working Group on the Ritual Year. Proceedings. Malta, March 20–24 2005. Malta, Junior College Msida*. Malta: Publishers Enterprises Group Ltd.
- MAZALOVA, N. P.
2001 *Chelovek v traditsionnykh somaticheskikh predstavleniyakh russkikh* [Man in Traditional Russian Somatic Representations]. St. Petersburg: Peterburgskoye vostokovedeniye]. (Ethnographica Petropolitana VIII.)
- MINNIYAKHMETOVA, Tatiana
2008 Symbols of Approaching Death: The Role of the Woman. In HÅLAND, Evy Johanne (ed) *Women, Pain and Death. Rituals and Everyday-Life on the Margins of Europe and Beyond*, 84–107, Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
2000 *Kalendarnyye obryady zakamskikh udmurtov* [Calendar Rituals of the Trans-Kama Udmurts]. Izhevsk: Udmurtskiy institut istorii, yazyka i literatury UrO RAN.
- VLADYKINA, T. G.
2002 Znayushchiy (tuno) v udmurtskoy traditsionnoy kul'ture [The Knower (Tuno) in Udmurt Traditional Culture]. In DRANNIKOVA N.V. (ed) *Narodnyye kul'tury Russkogo Severa: Materialy rossiysko-finskogo simpoziuma (3–4 iyunya 2001 goda)* [Folk Culture of the Russian North. Proceedings of the Russian-Finnish Workshop (3–4 June 2001)]. Arkhangelsk: Pomorskiy gosudarstvennyy universitet http://folk.pomorsu.ru/index.php?page=booksopen&book=1&book_sub=1_12 (accessed June 17, 2015)

Minniyakhmetova, Tatiana is an Udmurt Anthropologist with a PhD in Ethnology (Ufa Scientific Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 1996) and Folklore (University of Tartu, Estonia, 2003). Currently she is a research fellow at the Institute of History and European Ethnology at the University of Innsbruck in Austria. Academic interests and fields of research: traditional beliefs of Udmurts (Russia), folk calendars, ritual, ritual practice and folklore, the methodology of fieldwork, and diaspora groups. Conducted about 70 folklore/ethnographic field research projects, and authored and co-authored seven books and more than a hundred articles. Email-address: minnijah@hotmail.com
