

Udmurt Auto- and Hetero-Stereotypes about Physical Beauty

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Abstract: For Udmurtians, physical beauty is an attractive and impressive physique. In the late 19th century, Udmurt criteria for evaluating physical beauty were influenced by the aesthetic ideals of neighbouring peoples. A beautiful girl was supposed to have Slavic or Turkic features but not Udmurt ones. Northern Udmurts believed that an attractive young woman was fair-complexioned with fair hair and blue eyes, while southern Udmurts admired women with dark hair and black eyes. One can still hear them saying, “She is so beautiful, she doesn’t look like an Udmurt girl at all,” which is followed by more precise information, such as, “She looks like a Russian/Tatar woman.” This stereotype still exists among the Udmurts and their neighbouring peoples, especially the Russians.

Keywords: Udmurts–Russia, personal beauty, beauty culture, body image, social aspects of human body

Physical beauty is known to refer to attractive appearance and impressive physique. In this respect Udmurt folk songs are of special interest to researchers as they provide useful information on ideals of beauty. On careful analysis of Southern and Northern Udmurt lyrical songs, one can notice that auto-stereotypes about physical beauty in those songs have subtle nuances. According to Northern Udmurts, a beauty is a woman with a golden plait, blue eyes and a faint blush. Her appearance corresponds with her light-coloured clothes. In the opinion of Southern Udmurts, a beauty is a woman with dark hair and eyebrows, her eyes as dark as black currants. Her clothing is compared to a full-blown flower of *italmas* (European globe flower) and her voice to a nightingale singing.

I believe the difference in beauty perception by the Northern and Southern Udmurts is influenced to some extent by aesthetic ideals of their neighboring peoples. A beauty was considered to have Slavic (in the northern areas, close to Kirov Oblast with Russian population) or Turkic features (in the southern areas with Turkic population), but she was not supposed to look like an Udmurt woman. Even nowadays the Udmurts, especially elderly women, can say: “*Uchky-ay, kyčë cheber, udmurt tusyz no övöl*” (Look! What a beauty, she does not have the appearance of an Udmurt), and can add: “She looks like a

Russian woman” or “She looks like a Tatar woman.” So far this stereotype has been popular both among the Udmurts and their neighbouring peoples, especially among Russians.

In the 19th century the Northern Udmurts compared attractive women to dolls made of clay (*syuymuno*) and wax (*syus'muno*), or to Russian dolls (*žuchmuno*):

Milyam gine suzermy suzer no-a ma?

Lavkaye no puktylem žuchmuno kad'

[Our sister, what a beauty!

She looks like a Russian doll from a shop] (BOYKOVA – VLADYKINA 1992:86).

I am not inclined to consider the phrase “a Russian doll” to be influenced by Russian beauty stereotypes. The Udmurts must have meant children’s painted toys, which differed significantly from Udmurt handmade rag dolls. In some cases a Dymkovo toy (a painted clay doll) was implied, especially if it was compared to a clay doll “*syuymuno*”.

The folk ideals of beauty are found not only in folklore texts but also in ethnographic data. Thus, for instance, Nikolay Pervukhin, the inspector of national schools in Glazov county of Vyatka province, described an Udmurt beauty as follows:

“To be considered a beauty, a woman must be primarily of medium height, plump, and she must have big plump arms and legs as an evidence of her ability to work well... Dark, rather oblong than round eyes, a straight nose of medium size, dark narrow long eyebrows. The Votyaks believe these are the features a Votyak beauty has” (PERVUKHIN 1890:46–47).

Such beauties were seldom found, so the author adds: “The above mentioned features are of some importance to young boys, but their parents pay less attention to these characteristics, they are more concerned with a bride’s health and housewifeliness.” As for a bridegroom, his attractiveness was not important even to the bride’s parents. A woman never refused to marry a man just because he was not good looking enough (PERVUKHIN 1890:47).

Psychiatrist and neurologist Vladimir Bekhterev gave the following description of Udmurt females: “They mostly have red hair, a broad face, blue eyes, a large mouth and nose with a low nasal bridge, plump chest and belly” (BEKHTEREV 1880:638).

According to Irina Nazmutdinova’s research, the ancestors of the Udmurts living now in Kuyedinsky district of Perm Krai characterized a beauty as being “clean” (*chylkyt*). It suggests that the Udmurts emphasized not only her neatness and cleanliness, but also her attractiveness (NAZMUTDINOVA 2013b:224). Moreover, according to my colleague Lyudmila Karpova’s mother, who is from the Uva district of the Udmurt Republic, the above-mentioned word was also used to underline a woman’s physical beauty.

The State Archive of the Kirov Oblast contains a manuscript with a very remarkable description of the Udmurt beauty ideal:

“To be considered beautiful, a woman should be of medium height and plump enough, she should have big plump arms and thick (as a sign of labor force) legs. Her face should be round, white and rosy, without pockmarks. A thick plait is supposed to be attractive, light chestnut hair is preferable. The bright red hair is considered to be the ugliest women’s hair. A small mouth

and lips of medium size, dark eyes which are rather more oblong than round, a straight nose of medium size, dark narrow and long eyebrows...¹

However, folklore texts do not contain a detailed description of physical attractiveness of young men. Apparently, it was primarily associated with their physical performance, endurance, strength, agility, and proportional physique. A man is considered handsome if he is as lean as a wax candle, pine or maple (*yus' nyl kad', puzhym/badyar kad' voskres*), and as strong as a lynx (*balyan kad'*). He is supposed to have a smooth face without any pockmarks, fair or dark curly hair, but by no means bright red hair. A young man "should be lean, agile and well-built. His arms and legs should be large. He has blue eyes, a medium-sized nose, mouth, and lips. Less attention is paid to his facial cleanliness."²

"The red hair index" is certainly high among the Udmurts: the number of redheads varies from 7 to 21% in different groups (DUBOV 1989:96). The redheads' psychology is distinctive: they are more sensitive, vulnerable, and they have a specific worldview (KRYLOVA-VLADKIN 1999:131). Researchers also noted the endurance of the Udmurts, "although they are slim" (DUBOV 1989:96). As a rule they are of medium build, but not overweight, and they have a slender, muscular body (KRYLOVA-VLADKIN 1999:131).

Although the Udmurts' attitude towards Russians was cautious, often mistrustful and suspicious, the Udmurts tended to overestimate their neighbours. One of the pre-revolutionary researchers made a remark about it: "They do not appreciate their nationality at all, the highest praise for the Votyaks is to say that they resemble Russians."³ Unfortunately, this stereotype is still alive and well among some Udmurts, including the urban population: the Udmurts keep making derogatory remarks about themselves. Noting this phenomenon, one should remember that the historical interaction between the Udmurts and Russians was asymmetrical: Russians were more active than the Udmurts. Besides, one should not forget about the purposeful and aggressive missionary activity of the Orthodox Church.

However, it cannot be suggested that Udmurt society has always accepted any form of Russian borrowings positively. Thus, for instance, one of the Udmurt songs provides a figuratively negative attitude towards them:

Chil'pam chalma, žutkam chalma
Yrad sekyt yötiz-a?
Yrad sekyt öy yötysal,
Žuch kyshno luemed potiz-a?
 Woven, embroidered *chalma* [an Udmurt female headdress],
 Did you find it heavy?
 It would not be heavy,
 Maybe you want to become a Russian's wife? (PETROV 1936:132)

Physical beauty was rarely considered to be a self-value. Firstly, it was always associated with a person's spirituality, morality, diligence, physical health, and as for women – with

¹ The State Archive of the Kirov Oblast. Fund 170. Inventory 1. File 126. Sheet 31–31 verso.

² The State Archive of the Kirov Oblast. Fund 170. Inventory 1. File 126. Sheet 31–31 verso.

³ The State Archive of the Kirov Oblast. Fund 1122. Inventory 1. File 3. Sheet 75-75 verso.

their reproductive functions as well. The following sayings prove it, “*En uchky cheberesh shory, uchky solen uzhamez shory*” (Do not pay attention to the person’s beauty, pay attention to their work), “*Pushkaz övöl ke, vylaz ud lyaky*” (If there is nothing inside, you cannot add to it). In addition, an attractive physique has always been related to intelligence, “*Cheberen köt ug tyr*” (You can not be full with beauty), “*Cherez čök, viz’my medlo*” (A person’s beauty is not as important as their intelligence) (PEREVOZCHIKOVA 1991).

In his letters, Uno Holmberg also highlighted that the Udmurts assigned paramount importance to a person’s health, but not to their beauty:

“Now pagan Votyaks are buying their brides. The price for a bride does not depend on her beauty, her eyes and hair, but on her health. ‘It is worth paying for her, because she is strong and hardworking,’ say the Votyaks. But a thin girl does not cost much. Men choose their wives according to their ability to work. *Kalym*, the price for a bride, of course, varies depending on the economic well-being of the area. I guess a bride in Ufa province is twice more expensive than in Kazan province” (LALLUKKI et al. 2014:100).

The researcher also considered the age when people can get married:

“Sometimes the Votyaks can make a deal rather early when their children are too young. Once I stayed at one Votyak’s in the Birk district, he was 21 years old, but his son was already 6 years old. When I started to ask him how old he was when he got married, I was surprised to learn that he had married at the age of 12. His brother, who also lived in the same house, married at the age of 14. But their wives were both significantly older than their husbands” (LALLUKKI et al. 2014:101).

In fact, Udmurt wives were older than their husbands. The situation was especially typical of families with a small number of females.

In relations with the outside world, the Udmurts are often helpless, defenseless, and closed to something new and extraneous. According to Socrates, the body does not get ill apart from the soul. Psychological mood plays a vital role in the prevention and treatment of diseases, and in this situation the role of the environment, especially the family, cannot be overestimated. According to current data, married Udmurts feel more comfortable and happier as they are supported by their families. Not coincidentally, single people who have never been married commit suicide more often than the married ones: the index is 48.6% among the Udmurts, and 28.9% among Russians (VASILYEV 2001:8).

In the past, Udmurts had large families consisting of several generations. Family communications influenced the feelings of dependence and psychological attachment to relatives. Therefore, any conflict could inevitably destroy the current relationships and influence deep personal feelings which resulted in the high sensitivity of the Udmurts. According to recent research, social exclusion plays a potentially negative role in maintaining health and can eventually cause illness (MATSUMOTO 2002). This data also emphasizes the vital importance of the following behavioural dominant: a human being should live in harmony with other people: “Peace with oneself due to the peace with others” (KRYLOVA – VLADYKIN 1999:127). The opinion of others is of crucial importance for the Udmurts – it can literally destroy their fragile emotional health.

The community was aware of the danger of alcohol intake and tried to restrict its consumption by young people. The rules of morality, decencies and visitor etiquette

related to the use of intoxicating drinks are found in folkloric texts: “*Kudžem murt viz ěemles’no urod’*” (A drunken person is worse than a fool), “*Kurytse yuysa, žeche ud poty*” (Drinking alcohol you will not become good), and so on. A drunken person was called disapprovingly *tordos* (wino) (NIKITINA 1997:97).

According to field material by Irina Nazmutdinova, Udmurts do not like men who are vulgar and garrulous, but their ability to carry out different kinds of work is highly appreciated. Udmurts expressed their disapproval if there was a discrepancy between male behavior and ideas of masculinity. Those men were contemptuously called *zykyshno* (literally: a thin woman). To make derogatory remarks about such kind of men, Zakamsk Udmurts could use a harsh word *apakay* (comes from the word *apay* – sister), an unpleasant phrase *alama nylkyshno* (worthless woman), or an insulting Russian word *baba* (woman) (NAZMUTDINOVA 2013a:224).

As for hetero-stereotypes about the physical beauty of the Udmurts, it seems that the majority of pre-revolutionary researchers and observers did not consider the Udmurts to be a beautiful ethnic group. While describing their physical appearance, the researchers chose such words as “weak,” “puny,” “frail” and “feeble,” and also emphasized their small, deep-set eyes, prominent cheeks, average height, and red hair (KOSHURNIKOV 1880:5–6). For example, Alexander Radischev, while traveling through the territory of Udmurtia in the autumn of 1790 to a 10-year exile, briefly summarized about the Udmurts:

“The Votyaks are almost like Russians, most of them are married to Russian women. Their houses are already heated by wood-burning stoves. There are many mountains beginning from the town of Zura, although they are small, but steep. The Votyak women are not beautiful. The Votyaks sing while riding a horse like Russian coachmen. They tend to be cheerful rather than sad...” (RADISCEV 1909:357).

According to current observations on the youth, including young rural Udmurts studying at Udmurt State University, they do not tend to belittle their attractiveness and physical appearance, giving preference to the Turkic or Slavic type of beauty. However, it is not as inherent in rural young people as it is in young urban Udmurts. The traditional stereotype of “the Udmurt beauty” is being reassessed by the urban young people. Empirical experience shows that the preferences of young Udmurts are influenced by the current fashion, Western standards and criteria for beauty, which dominate in the modeling business.

Besides, we should remember that folk culture has formed its own knowledge about the means of hygiene and cosmetology, which help to maintain physical beauty and health and to hide some physical appearance defects.

Nowadays Udmurts are actively involved in assimilation processes. It is believed that more beautiful children are born in ethnically mixed families as a result of “blood mixture,” and it seems to be true when it comes to the Udmurts. We must also remember that parents cherish their children, care about their diet, do not force them to work too hard, care about their health, education, and so on. All this excludes the harm to children’s physical and mental health, which contributes to their good-looking appearance.

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