

Gathering the Female Body in Komi Everyday Life and Rituals

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Recently the researchers dealing with the notion of a human being as such in traditional culture have become quite popular in Russian humanities. The interest that the authors of this kind of works have shown towards the studying of the human body is especially remarkable. A number of articles by Galina Kabakova, Svetlana Tolstaya, Tatyana Agapkina, Nikita Tolstoy, V. Usacheva, Anna Plotnikova and O. Ternovskaya dealing, in one way or another, with the human body, are included in the encyclopaedic dictionary *Slavonic Antiquities (Slavyanskiye... 1995–1999)*. Natalya Mazalova's monograph *Human Composition: Human Being in Traditional Somatic Conceptions of the Russians* (2001) is dedicated to the popular concept of the human body, its structure and functioning in Russian tradition. The author of the monograph pays special attention to the position that the human body occupies in the world view. Within the framework of generic research we could mention several works with the female body as the research object. Different sides of the life of the female body are touched upon in a number of articles included in the collection *Sex and Eroticism in Russian Traditional Culture (Seks i erotika... 1996)* edited by Andrey Toporkov. Galina Kabakova's survey *Anthropology of Female Body in Slavonic Tradition* (2001) dwells upon the mythology of the female body. The researcher has made an attempt to "reconstruct the image of the body through the relations of the human being with other people and the universe" (Kabakova 2001: 11). Bearing in mind the aforementioned, the author of the monograph has analysed the linguistic, folkloristic and ethnographical data.

Women's behaviour, contrary to that of men's, is much more regulated, which is expressed in a number of everyday conventionalities (stereotypes) restricting their freedom, as well as ritual situations aimed at supporting her status. The purpose of this article is to give a survey of the ideas of the Komi people about the woman and the female body, to analyse a few manipulations performed with the female body in everyday life and in the context of rituals, as well as indicate how the

peculiarities of the female body bring about some behavioural stereotypes.

In the world mythology the woman is often related to chaotic forces. According to Eleazar Meletinsky, “the female element... is sometimes associated with the element of water as well as with chaos, and is usually interpreted as part of “nature” and not “culture”” (1976: 208). In the mythological texts of the Komi people the mutual relation of the woman with the underworld, the world of chaos, is expressed in the idea that the “dark” demiurge *Omöl* directly participates both in the creation of the first woman and in her subsequent life.¹

The connection of the woman with the underworld is also confirmed by linguistic data. The expression *Энь омла* in the Komi language meaning “womb”, which, according to Nikolay Konakov, is semantically and etymologically related to the term *Омоль*, is an indication of the symbolism of chaos, as both the womb and chaos possess the meaning of a **place for giving birth**. This fact makes it possible for us to establish a correlation between the bottom part of the female body and the spatial/cosmic bottom.

As the bearer of the chaotic element, the woman in her everyday life has to structure herself in order to be in correspondence with the established cosmic order. Owing to that, her behaviour is regulated and

¹ According to an anthropological version of the Komi, both creators participate in the process of making a human being *Yen*, which is the bearer of the light element, and *Omöl* representing the dark one. While creating a human being, it happens that *Yen* makes a male, while *Omöl* succeeds in making a female figure, which is brought to life by *Yen*, who possesses the life-giving element (Limerov 1996: 18). Another version of the myth attributes to the “dark” demiurge the creation of female genitals. *Omöl* spat at the perineum of the woman created by *Yen*, and as a result, the corresponding sexual organ was formed there (Ulyashev 1999: 293). While unfolding the following mythological plot, the woman always turns out to be connected with the underworld and the negative element. This especially manifests itself in the texts in the form of a love affair between the woman and the “dark” demiurge. So, Adam’s first wife, who submitted herself to the influence of the evil-minded *Omöl*, killed her new-born children, and, by doing so, infuriated *Yen* and, consequently, was cursed. Transforming into Death, she, together with the daughters she had killed, went underground, i.e., the underworld. *Yen* makes Eve for Adam from his own rib (cf. the biblical myth of the creation of Eve from Adam’s rib), a woman virtuous and pure in mind and body. Yet, Adam’s second wife also comes into contact with *Omöl*, i.e., the underworld (Limerov 1996: 20). In the myth about the Flood, the woman also turns out to be the reason why Evil invades the world. The idea of the myth is the imposing of punishment by God on people for their sins followed by the rebirth of mankind from the family of the pious Noah. The Evil, however, personified in *Omöl*, remains in the world, and Noah’s wife also has a share in it. Due to the fact that the first woman is connected with *Omöl*, people’s descendants are far from perfection (Limerov 1996: 64).

more ritualised than that of men. This is, first and foremost, manifested in women's everyday activities that are directed to smartening herself and her body, in other words, the woman has to make herself look neat and tidy day in day out.

Above all, this is related to the customs of everyday dressing habits and wearing clothes. In addition to the utilitarian meaning (cover and protect the body from the influence of outward factors), clothing also possesses a symbolic meaning. According to Yan Chesnov, "this as if gathers up the whole body, attributing integrity to its vital forces" (Chesnov 1998, quoted in Agapkina, Toporkov 2001: 12). In this connection, we should also mention the fact how the Komi-Zyrians follow a certain sequence in putting on different articles of clothing, as well as in taking them off for the night. The Zyrians maintained that the violation of this order by people resulted in different diseases and inconveniences for them. So there were special regulations for taking off everyday clothes. For example, the *sarafan* (long sleeveless garment worn on a shirt) was to be "taken off inside out over the head, but it was a sin to take it off over the feet, as "in this way it was taken off only from a deceased person"" (Sharapov 2000: 205). The everyday clothing that was taken off for the night was not left lying inside out, as people held that if you did so, "the devils will wear it afterwards"(ibid.: 105). In order to avoid unfavourable consequences, it also had to be hung in a strictly fixed way (Sharapov 1999: 288).

It should be mentioned that the supporters of the tradition perceive clothing as an indication of the fact that "the human being belongs to the world of culture" (Agapkina, Toporkov 2001: 12). Nakedness/undressing, on the other hand, eliminates a person from the cultural frames and returns them to the natural state (ibid.), i.e., to the world of chaos. So, for example, missing clothes often serve as a distinctive feature for demonic creatures: Vas (water elf), Vörs (sylvan spirit), and others. The upholders of traditional culture frequently perceive nakedness as a characteristic feature attributed to witches and exorcists, whose connection with the Great Beyond is above any suspicion. In order to transform into a bear, "the witch first takes off the clothes and after that turns three successive somersaults against the sun" (Sidorov 1928: 15). Alexey Sidorov also mentions witches who, having taken off all their clothes, fed with their milk repulsive insects who were crawling along their bodies like small glow-worms (Sidorov 1928: 72). From the social point of view, nakedness or half-nakedness is characteristic of drunkards, beggars, imbeciles and the like, i.e., the people

from the periphery of culture and society” (Agapkina, Toporkov 2001: 12). Consequently, the less dressed a person is, the farther they are situated from the centre of culture and the nearer they are to the underworld.

In this connection it is important to pay attention to the importance of the completeness of the costume. Any missing element in the set is regarded as the violation of the existing norms. So, a married Zyrian woman never appears in public without her headgear; it is also obligatory to wear a belt, and so on. As Vasily Nalimov has noted, “married women are more dressed than girls” (1999: 139). This is connected with the fact that married women who lead sexual life, are infected by sexual impurity called *пеш*.² This is why they have to wear more clothes, so that they could protect the surrounding people from the harmful influence of their organisms (Nalimov 1999: 141).

On the other hand, clothes protected people from the negative outside influence. Serving as a supplement to the body, they were actually considered as part of the latter. Owing to that, any disconformity to the norms in clothing – torn garment, unfastened belt, etc. – was considered as the violation of the established order, and consequently, as harmful for the owner. This is connected with the idea of their possible magic influence on the human body. Any manipulations with articles of clothing were regarded as variants of witchcraft. So, people condemned any kind of changing clothes during the day as they saw it as conjuring. According to Valery Sharapov, “women who put on a *sarafan* in the morning, tried not to take it off during the day, and, if necessary, put another garment on it. Only in the holiday period it was not prohibited to change clothes several times during the day, although even in this case, many women put on several *sarafans* all at once, one on top of another, and the same way several skirts – for the grandeur of the festive attire” (Sharapov 2000: 105). Also, the Zyrians maintained that any damages inflicted on clothing resulted in consequences for their owners (Sharapov 1999: 284). For example, according to Alexey Sidorov, at Udor “young maidens who aroused envy in others with their appearance, health, deftness, etc., vehemently observed their clothing, as a malicious exorcist could cut off a piece of a garment, kerchief, or any other article of clothing, and through this, damage them” (1928: 46).

An important element in everybody care is also setting one’s

² *Пеш* in the Komi language has the meaning of “impurity”, “evil”.

hair. There are two kinds of ritual hairdos known as “maidenly” and “womanly”. The conversion of the hairdo from the former to the latter form symbolises the change in the status of the woman. In this connection we should especially emphasise the aspect of making the first hairdo, which provides “the child with the “cultural” characteristics of her sex” (Baiburin 1993: 59). In this way, the plaiting of the first braid serves as an important stage in the socialising of a girl, adopting her into the world of culture. The maidenly hairdo (the braid) remains unchanged until the girl gets married. It is noteworthy that the changing of the hairdo takes place in sacred places: in the sauna, in the church, at the window. The godmother unravels the bride’s braid and sets her hair in a “womanly” hairdo – *баба юр*. An obligatory feature of the married woman is her headgear. As Vasily Nalimov has put it, “without the headgear women are not supposed to participate in the church service or bake bread; the latter is an activity that is considered to be sacred” (Nalimov 1999: 139).

Here we should also mention the negative attitude of the surrounding people towards the “wrong” hairdo and untidy hair in everyday life, as it was regarded as the violation of the “cosmic balance” (Victor Semenov). It is noteworthy that uncovered and loose hair is often a feature characterising some demonic creatures (mermaids, witches, revenants, sylvan spirits and others). In this connection the requirement of uncovered and loose hair set for fortune-tellers seems to be well grounded. According to Semenov, in the context of fortune telling, loose and uncovered hair served as a characteristic of “the other” world (Semenov 1991: 71). An unfastened belt was also considered as a necessary precondition for fortune telling.

Ornaments were also supposed to be one of the obligatory features of smartening the female body. Women’s attire, according to archaeological finds, included ornaments, such as necklaces, pendants, earrings, frontal ornaments, bracelets, and rings. As a rule, ornaments were the last to be put on and they were worn on clothes. Some parts of the body were especially accentuated by ornaments; these were the head, neck, chest and waist, which were the most vulnerable to the penetration of malicious powers.

It is important to note that the amount of the worn ornaments was the greatest at festivities, i.e., at the time “when the forces of the chaos /—/ prevail over the cosmic organisation of the world” (Toporov 1992: 330). As V. Toporov has stated, the cosmos “actualises the idea of aesthetically marked order, ornamentation” (ibid.: 9). Consequently, by adorning

herself, the woman frees herself from the underworld revelations.³ The ability to ward off the undesirable influence of the world of chaos was attributed to small bells and tinklers. They were given special preference, “they were worn at temples, plaited in hair, attached to the rings worn at temples or fastened to the headband” (Savelyeva, Korolev 1990: 57), as well as to the belt. According to A. Sidorov, among ancient women’s ornaments we can also find large silver earrings shaped after the webbed feet of a duck called *чусы* (Sidorov 1924: 44). They are peculiar as they depict the Komi totemic animal – the duck – that performs the protective function. Infrequently we can also find a few shells among the ornaments of the Komi women, which originally had the function of a talisman (ibid.: 135).

In traditional culture one of the elements for decorating women’s costumes was embroidery. Embroidery was positioned “round the neck /—/ and on the chest; and, for example, a three-quarter sleeve was embroidered at the elbow, and a full-length sleeve – at the wrist” (AILLH, No. 1237). The embroidered patterns were also concentrated on shoulders. As V. Sharapov has mentioned, sometimes the hem of the shirt was also decorated with embroidery (Sharapov 1999: 98). It is characteristic that red yarn was used for embroidering the patterns, as it was considered to be a colour with a protective force (AILLH, No. 1237). Each pattern had its own meaning: “a circle, for example, /—/ denotes a talisman, and cubes and rhombi /—/ this is like your own yard, your home” (ibid.). Festive costumes were decorated with more complicated and brighter patterns, which was connected with the idea of festivities as the time for chaos.

The process of structuring the body is manifested more clearly in such ritual situations as childbirth and wedding, in which the manipulations with the female body are directed at dismantling it and gathering it again afterwards, which guarantees the alteration and the consequent strengthening of her status. The mythological category of chaos is even more clearly expressed in such sacramental situations as losing the virginity and pregnancy.

It is interesting to note that, to denote a virgin, the spoken Komi language uses the term *дзонь*, which semantically expresses the intactness of a person, the state of being undamaged, uninjured. In the dictionary this notion possesses the following meanings: “whole,

³ *Хтонос* – mythological underworld, the world of chaos and impurity.

incommencable, intact, uninjured, pure, in order, healthy and undamaged, in good health" (*Sravnitelnyi...* 1961: 105). Incommencability, purity correlates with the ideas of the intactness of the chaos, which comprises all the component parts of the would-be world, that is why in the context of the wedding ritual the violation of the intactness of the virgin seems as an act of building up and organising the cosmos, which comprises both the dismantling and the consequent gathering of the bride's body (Baiburin 1993: 71–73).

Pregnancy as intactness-chaos requires sprucing it up through childbirth. A pregnant woman stands much nearer to the world of chaos as, according to Albert Baiburin, her child can be regarded as a messenger of the other world. Her closeness to the underworld prescribed to her certain behavioural orientations. On the one hand, she became more vulnerable, and therefore she was prescribed to strictly observe the measures directed at protecting the embryo and herself from the evil eye. So, it was forbidden to her to wear beautiful new clothes, speak about her good health, participate in wedding or funeral rituals, have her hair cut. It was also prohibited for her to have any contacts with witches. On the other hand, due to her closeness to the other world, the pregnant woman herself was considered as impure and dangerous for those surrounding her. Therefore it was forbidden for her to take care of children, breast-feed, touch any men's possessions, the fishing and hunting gear, and so on (Ilyina 1999: 175).

It is noteworthy that the sauna was the place where a child was born. It was also customary to do it in a cattle shed, on the doorway of a dwelling, on the basement or the lid of a well (Ilyina 1999: 175). A common feature of all the aforementioned places is the fact that they are all situated on the symbolic borderline between our own and the other, unfamiliar world. Their marginal position proves the child's afterlife nature, its coming from the Great Beyond.

The following ritual activities concerning the woman in childbed are directed to the recreation of her physical structure. In order to do that, the woman is rubbed and massaged already in the sauna, accompanying these activities by prayers. After the childbirth the woman is recommended to wash herself with the cake of soap she had once used before her wedding, still being a bride. According to the words of an informant, "the woman was to hide the bar of soap and, after the childbirth, or during illness, wash herself with it, as the spell cast on it said that beautiful as she was at the time and physically strong, so she was supposed to be during her whole life, and she kept

this cake of soap with her all her life and washed herself with it after the childbirth or when she was ill” (AILLH, No. 1237).

In this way, putting herself in order daily, adorning herself and smartening herself and her body, the woman is prepared for everyday activities. In the context of a ritual, dismantling and gathering the body symbolises the situation of the chaos and the consequent building of the cosmos, which is expressed in the change of the woman’s status. In this way, “gathering” her body, the woman is separated from the world of chaos and introduced into the sphere of culture.

Sources

AILLH = Archives of the Institute of Language, Literature and History, No. 1237. (АФ ИЯЛИ, № 1237.)

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