

## An Esoteric Part of Mari Culture

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**Abstract:** This study shows some elements of an esoteric part of Mari culture, namely the classification and pragmatic characteristics of Mari charms; the description of charm performers and their magical rituals. Mari charms are an integral part of the national spiritual culture, a leading constituent of its magic domain. At the same time, the tradition of practicing magical texts is a living cultural phenomenon which can be observed still today. This research has been carried out with the help of methods and techniques based on the pragmalinguistic approach applied to 580 texts taken from different sources. The greater part of the collected charms consists of the texts gathered during the researcher's folklore field expeditions to the regions of Mari compact settlements. The analysis revealed six groups of charms with a prevalence of texts for healing and protecting from witchcraft. This study describes the sequence of actions in a strict ritual procedure of charm usage by magical practitioners. It is shown that the core component during the succession of steps is the verbal formula itself. Structurally, Mari charms consist of different parts each of which plays a specific role in the pragmatic function of the text.

**Key words:** The Maris, esoteric texts, magical practitioners, succession, analysis

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### INTRODUCTION

The objective of this research is to show some elements of an esoteric part of Mari culture. The study gives a general description of Mari esoteric texts and the context of their usage as well as revealing their classification taking into consideration their pragmatic functions.

Mari charms represent a separate folklore genre, constituting an integral part of national spiritual culture. At the same time, the tradition of practicing charms is still a living cultural phenomenon among the Mari.

The majority of the Mari (Volga Finns) lives in the Republic of Mari El. One of the subjects of the Russian Federation, the Republic of Mari El is situated in the Eastern part of the East European plain in the basin of the middle flow of the Volga river. The territory of Mari El stretches for 275 km from West to East and 150 km from North to South and comprises 23.3 thousand km<sup>2</sup>. According to the results of the population census in 2010, out of 571 382 Maris in Russia 290 900 live in Mari El. Despite Turkic and Russian influence during centuries of contacts the Mari have succeeded in preserving their

cultural traditions and rich folklore and have remained faithful to their magic and religion. Therefore, sacred and esoteric texts-Mari ethnic prayers and charms are of considerable interest in the study of spiritual culture today.

Mari magical practitioners who possess such knowledge manage it according to their pragmatic aims thus ensuring their peculiar status in Mari rural society. They do not willingly like to share their knowledge of esoteric texts, nevertheless Mari charms have already been a subject of linguistic analysis (Sebeok and Ingemann, 1956). In two monographs the American scholars showed peculiar characteristics and singled out sporadic stylistic features on different text levels.

New branches of knowledge such as text linguistics and pragmalinguistic studies provide new methods and techniques for a wider systemic approach to this folklore genre (Glukhova *et al.*, 2015). The applicability of linguistic techniques to folklore genres reveals language and style characteristics and compositional distinctive features of Mari esoteric texts. This approach can draw on the data obtained by folklore researchers and ethnographers in the investigation of this sphere.

An overview of the currently available literature on the chosen subject in Mari culture shows the absence of a unified and generally accepted interpretation of charm. Here we offer a working definition of this folklore genre.

A Mari charm is an oral, rhythmically organized verbal formula of considerable length, containing a wish, a will or a command. It is employed in a ritual situation and is believed to produce a desired effect under certain conditions because of the magical power both of the word and the person who uses it with definite pragmatic goals.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The results of this research have been achieved by a complex combination of methods and techniques from different branches of linguistics and folklore studies.

In the initial stage of the research circa 500 folkloristic texts were collected during the folklore and ethnolinguistic expeditions of the authors to different regions of the Republic of Mari El between 1992-1997 and 2008-2013.

The main methods of the field research used during the expedition work were the observation and interviewing of a considerable part of the village inhabitants in every region. The interviewing was carried out with the help of questionnaires that concerned different spheres of Mari traditional culture. The questionnaires were written by the expedition participants and reflected their interest in local rituals and beliefs, folk mythology, magic rituals connected to plants, animals and birds, folk-medicine, etc. The interviewing of the informants, mainly local 'tradition bearers' was carried out according to a single pattern in order to make the comparison of collected texts easier.

The term "text" is broad in its application. During the 1980s the notion of "text" was the focus of attention of many linguistic schools. The definitions and methods of that period still inspire contemporary scholars studying different aspects of text. Text is regarded as a semantic unit which forms a unified and coherent whole. The main characteristic traits are: informativity, integrity, interdependence of the components, a uniting idea and one general aim.

A charm, like any folklore text has a form which is invariable and repeated and the contents which are closely connected with its pragmatic aim. Texts of charms existed in spoken (phonic) realization of the Mari language. Oral texts in order to be easily remembered and transmitted from one generation to the next, must be well structured and semantically organized, coherent and must consist of a relatively small number of words. Research into the collected charms showed that the following key

points mentioned here help to retain in memory and to reprocess texts of charm: the pragmatic aims of each text; a certain selectivity of lexis connected with pragmatic aims; a non-linear character of content development; a constant "feedback" of series of events; a limited number of compositional expressive stylistic means and their specific combination; a restricted set of stylistic devices and a particular type of their accumulation (Glukhova *et al.*, 2015).

In this study, we will show the results of the pragmatic approach to the ritual procedure carried out by magical practitioners and the contents of the charms which also helped to classify texts into different classes and groups.

The pragmatic analysis of language is understood to be an "investigation into that aspect of meaning which is derived ... from the way in which utterances are used and how they relate to the context in which they are uttered".

Observation and interviewing of Mari magical practitioners showed that the collected texts can be used only in certain contexts as they contain different values in comparison with other folklore genres (Glukhova *et al.*, 2015). For example, texts aimed at treatment for heart disease were used only in such cases as.

When a person had been frightened and his/her heart had begun to beat more rapidly; when a person had fallen in love was very agitated could not be calmed and his/her heart beat very fast; when 'a witch' had 'spoiled' a person and inflicted harm.

The ritual procedure has two groups of factors: necessary conditions; a certain program of consecutive order of actions.

The first group-necessary conditions-includes the presence of a magician who knows the ritual, the texts and possesses supernatural powers; metal objects with sharp edges; a person who needs help; food and drinks. In other words, this group of factors encompasses different aspects of the act of communication.

The consecutive order of actions, constituting another group of factors, consists of a preparatory stage (the positioning of the participants and their poses); creating a miracle mindset by first verbal formulae (an initial phrase); the process of reciting the suitable text adequate to the situation, exhaling and spitting; the expression of the patient's gratitude and the rules for going home. Thus, these factors embody verbal and non-verbal behavior on the part of the communicants.

It is obvious that the described ritual procedure is nothing else but a complex type of communication with both verbal and non-verbal aspects to which discourse analysis used in linguistic pragmatics can be applied.

Thus, we will discuss the results of it starting with a description of Mari magical practitioners and their non-verbal behavior in a complex situational context.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Mari magical practitioners and their rituals:** As pointed out above, charms are rhythmically organized verbal formulae employed in particular situations. It is believed that the desired effect is achieved under certain conditions because of the magical power both of the text (Malinowski, 1948) and of the person who uses it with definite pragmatic aims.

People, who are variously called witches, sorcerers, seers, magicians, allegedly possess extraordinary abilities as they can receive bio-energy from nature and transform it into personal power to heal people or to inflict evil on them. They are divided by Mari ethnographers and folklore researchers into five groups depending on their abilities. The first group includes those who can foresee and predict the future can find a thief and stolen items. The second group can diagnose illness and tell the cause of the disease being clairvoyants. Those who use their power while reading charms, incanting different objects by spitting and murmuring to them are considered sorcerers. People called magicians can heal or 'harm' people, objects and places and belong to a rare group. People from the last and most dangerous group are called 'witches' as their main aim is to inflict evil on people and to spoil everything (Yakovlev, 1887; Vasilyev, 1915; Petrov, 1993).

Sorcerers from groups three to five used and use charms in their practice. In contemporary ethnographic works there is information only on folk healers.

The exact knowledge of the text and the strict order of the magical practitioner's actions are a prerequisite for successful results of the procedure which is a coherent whole organized systemically. One of the important stages of magic ritual is its beginning.

The Mari historian and ethnographer V. Petrov describes different types of a magic practice used by Mari charmers (Petrov, 1993). During the field folklore expeditions of the researchers of this study these descriptions were confirmed.

Contemporary Mari charm users resort to one of four different ways of beginning ritual actions which are mostly connected with the non-verbal behavior of the magician. As a rule, the sorcerer's feet are placed on a metal, sharp-pointed object which can be a knife, a pair of scissors, an axe, a scythe or a sickle. The sorcerer should keep his/her knees apart. The person who is seeking help should sit facing the sorcerer with the sharp edges of the instrument directed towards him/her. Metal objects are considered to guard against evil spirits which cannot, in this case, overcome the magic power of the words.

During the procedure the sorcerer holds a glass of water (milk or vodka) in one hand close to his/her face and at the same time stirs the liquid in the glass with a sharp iron object which may be a knife or a pair of scissors. During this, the magical practitioner recites the text from memory in an audible whisper into a glass. Instead of liquid the sorcerer may use food or even different material objects. In this case, the incanted item is placed in front of the wizard's face, close to his/her mouth. It is an immediate application of magical virtue; to convey the spell to some material substance which afterwards will be given to the person to be charmed or healed. This kind of procedure is the most popular nowadays. It is especially effective for toothless sorcerers. Toothless magicians should follow one more rule after their feet are placed on the iron objects: first, they are to pronounce an initial formula: "I have iron teeth. With my iron teeth I will tear to pieces any evil or disease." This sentence has another variant: "I am standing on a steel axe, I am holding a knife made of steel. I am biting with my steel teeth. Great steel of the czar, be a witness!" (Petrov, 1993).

The second way differs from the aforementioned procedure. The sorcerer holds a besom (a broom, especially one consisting of twigs, tied in a bundle) in one hand and the scissors in the other. The feet are placed on any metal object. Before the whole 'seance' the sorcerer should pronounce the following phrase: "My teeth are made of iron. I will bite any evil with my iron teeth. I will cut any evil with my scissors. I will sweep any evil away with my besom" (Glukhova *et al.*, 2015).

One more variant of magical procedure, the third one, differs slightly from the previous series of actions. The sorcerer has a knife in his/her hand his/her feet are on a besom. The initial phrase is: "I will cut out all evil with a knife and I will sweep it away with a besom."

The simplest way of starting the procedure consists in the following: the sorcerer holds a pair of scissors or a knife in his/her hands, nothing is placed under the feet.

The necessary conditions for the ritual also include the choice of the sorcerer's position and the choice of the 'patient's' poise. The person who asks for help has to sit with his/her palms on their knees to look straight into the sorcerer's eyes or at the incanted object. Neither knees nor feet should touch each other.

The consecutive order of actions, constituting another group of factors, consists of a preparatory stage (the positioning of the participants and their poses); creating a miracle mindset by first verbal formulae (an initial phrase); the process of recitation of the suitable text adequate to the situation, exhaling and spitting; the expression of the patient's gratitude and the rules for going home. A magical practitioner while reciting the text, places his/her feet on an axe or a handsaw. In his/her hands(s) he holds a pair of scissors or a knife. In the other hand(s) he has a glass of liquid. While pronouncing

the text the healer exhales air into the vessel, spitting into it after each sentence. Simultaneously, the healer stirs the liquid with the knife or scissors. Having recited the text, the sorcerer throws the knife or scissors onto the floor, watching whether this metal object will stick into it. If it does not, the words of the charm will not be effective and the procedure should be repeated. But if everything is all right the next stage is to pass the vessel with the liquid to the person who has come for help. The healer hands it to the person, who, in his/her turn, gives the healer money (usually not very much) or any object. This transaction means that the healing or magic power of the charms has been bought or exchanged and will be beneficial to the patient (Shaberdin, 1973).

The person who has come to the healer may drink part of the liquid immediately. The rest of it is taken home. While carrying the vessel with the enchanted liquid, the person must observe certain rules: the vessel should be placed in the left breast pocket above the waist-belt; near it any small metal object is put; if the person does not have one(s) he asks for a piece of charcoal from the healer (Petrov, 1993; Shaberdin, 1973; Gorskaya, 1969). It will retain the magic power of the liquid. On the way home the person should not talk with passers-by should not sneeze should not lose anything. Only then the magic power is considered to be effective.

**Classification of Mari charms:** The componential and contextual analyses showed that numerous people's aspirations expressed in the analyzed charms are connected with the following:

- Good health for people and animals; one's own well-being, prosperity and concord in the family; luck and a peaceful life
- The increase of different types of cattle in the yard their health and good productivity
- A profitable outcome of agricultural products connected with the work in the fields and in the orchards
- Successful hunting and fishing: abundance of wild animals and birds in the forests and fields and fish in the lakes and rivers
- One's own protection from different types of sorcery ('evil eye', 'evil tongue', etc.)
- Protection of cattle from witchcraft
- Annihilation of evil magic in the person or in the animal
- The spreading of evil to all types of people's activity and domestic animals

The content of any charm should be pragmatically oriented as it is used in a certain situation for a certain practical goal. Therefore, charms have clear-cut pragmatic aims. Addressees, people who seek help, can get

necessary assistance and relief. Charm users can heal people and animals with the help of magical power. Seers can help others in everyday life and regulate inter-personal relationships.

Taking into consideration the most general pragmatic goals, charms can be classified into six large groups in the analyzed corpus of texts.

- Charms for healing: people, animals
- Charms protecting from witchcraft: people, animals, plants and objects
- Charms countering bad effects and freeing from witchcraft: people, animals, plants and objects
- Charms bringing good, benefit and profit to: people, animals, plants
- Charms inflicting evil on people, animals, plants and objects
- Charms changing interpersonal relationships

However, it may be noted that charms from groups two to four may be considered as belonging to two groups simultaneously as their meanings overlap: charms against witchcraft, charms annihilating bad effects and releasing from evil, charms inflicting evil are connected with the texts from group one as they lead to changes in the health of people and animals. Healing charms have the notion of "freeing from witchcraft", "dissolution of evil" or "annihilation of evil".

The first group of charms comprises the texts which are extremely numerous. Among them the following texts can be differentiated.

Charms healing people from: alcoholism; bleeding; burns; chicken pox; ear-aches; flu; internal diseases; strains; nervous break-downs; poisoning (from poison and from the result of a snakebite); rickets; skin diseases (small pox); toothache; yellow jaundice and some others.

A person's health is vitally important for all household activities, work in the field, hunting in the forest, fishing in the rivers and lakes. It can be destroyed or restored by the charms imbued with the magical craft of the sorcerers. Their state of health affects people's relations in their family. It is no wonder that this group prevails in the material analyzed.

Charms for healing domestic animals also represent a vast proportion of texts. They are to heal horses from colic; to calm the horse; to heal cows.

This group can be enlarged by texts whose main goal is the preservation of all the products received from animals and to prevent their theft (milk, butter, cream, cottage cheese).

The Mari believed and it seems that people believe even nowadays that not only a person's health could be affected by the magic power of words but their whole life could be spoiled by curses.

To prevent certain conflict situations a large group of charms against witchcraft is used. People think that evil can enter their lives during their work at home in the field, in the forest, near rivers and lakes, by air, by water, etc. The “evil eye” or “evil tongue” can spoil relationships among relatives and make their family lives intolerable. The texts defend people against evil eyes, evil tongues, wicked neighbors, sorcery and witchcraft and against witches. The content of these texts and the effects are to influence all spheres of a person’s life.

### CONCLUSION

The charm is considered a powerful instrument in solutions to contradictions in inter-personal relationships. Family wealth and health matters are also an area of charms application. The Maris use charms quite often. Nowadays texts exist orally or are written down in special notebooks. Semantic text analysis showed people’s numerous aspirations connected with:

- Good health for people and animals in all types of activities; one’s own well-being, prosperity and concord in the family; luck and a peaceful life
- The increase of different types of cattle in the yard, their health and good productivity
- The profitable outcome of agricultural products connected with work in the fields and in the orchards
- Successful hunting and fishing: abundance of wild animals and birds in the forests and fields and fish in the lakes and rivers
- One’s own protection from different types of sorcery (‘evil eye’, ‘evil tongue’, etc.)
- Protection of cattle from witchcraft
- Annihilation of evil magic in a person or animal
- The spreading of evil to all types of a person’s activities and to someone’s domestic animals

Their magical force is aimed at inter-personal relationships, agricultural work, hunting, fishing and working with animals, etc. Requests concerning the social

sphere, expressions of gratitude to numerous gods and high moral values of the community belong to the domain of the saurus of Mari prayers but not of charms.

The language of charms reflects man’s closeness to nature and to the surrounding landscape. It shows that some of the most fundamental activities of man are inextricably entwined with man’s natural environment. This world outlook is reflected in the intuitive notions contained in charms.

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