In sacred groves: Paganism revives in Russia

by Michael Bourdeaux in the October 18, 2000 issue

In the forest shrine, the meat of two rams and a goat cook in great cauldrons suspended from wooden frames. Cloth belts stained with the blood of these sacrificial animals hang from the trees. Higher up, the branches are festooned with votive offerings—items of clothing brought by people who claim to have been cured during earlier ritual sacrifices. This is a scene not from the distant European past but from Russia's Mari El Republic today. Located along the Volga River some 400 miles east of Moscow, Mari El has solid indigenous populations of Muslims and Buddhists. Pagans are spread more thinly, but they have emerged as a presence, even a political force, during the past decade both here and in many areas of Siberia.

The Mari are not Russian but the survivors of an ancient westward movement of an Asian people, the Finno-Ugrians. They have their own language and are now reasserting their old religion. The communists found it easier to demolish Orthodox churches than to find secret shrines in the dense forests and identify pagan priests who in their daily lives were employed in ordinary, usually humble professions. Now the karts, as the priests and shamans are called, have emerged into the open and are willing to meet even the rare foreigners who penetrate the region.

British anthropologist David C. Lewis witnessed and was allowed to photograph the ceremony described above (he recounts it in his recent book *After Atheism*: *Religion and Ethnicity in Russia and Central Asia*). Each kart has his own shrine, and there are several in close proximity. The one Lewis attended is, incongruously, dedicated to St. Peter. On the saint's day, the president of the Mari El Republic visited the sacred grove and partook of the food offered by the kart. He lit a candle in front of a tree, and the people knelt before it in a semicircle while the kart recited prayers in the Mari language.

Though paganism in Mari El is primarily a rural phenomenon, it has supporters in the towns and cities and is producing a growing literature. A pagan political party is

gaining strength and is a model for the indigenous peoples of neighboring republics. An interrepublic pagan political union in the lower Volga region may soon come into being.

How is the Orthodox Church responding to this challenge? Yoshkar-Ola, Mari El's capital, had seven churches in 1917. The last one closed in the early '60s, making the city the only regional capital without a functioning Orthodox church. Churches were rebuilt during the '90s, and 35 parishes with 44 clergy now exist. But since all the priests are Russian and few speak the Mari language, they primarily aim their mission at ethnic Russians.

In '93, Mari El, which previously had belonged to the Kazan diocese, became the 100th diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church. Patriarch Alexsy II arrived in Yoshkar-Ola to inaugurate the new diocese. In his speech he criticized the incursion of foreign missionaries and seemed almost to welcome the presence of paganism. "The traditional faiths and religious organizations of our country must live peacefully together and not oppose one another," he stated. "Some Mari are Christians and some are pagans. The Russian population here is at root Orthodox, but the Orthodox will not inspire war and hatred toward other traditional creeds."

The Orthodox Church is producing prayers and liturgies in the local language. This might eventually bring some Mari into the priesthood and make for a more defined missionary outreach to them. But the local Baptists and Pentecostals are more efficient in introducing services of worship in the Mari language and therefore in attracting ethnic converts.

Paganism is reviving with even greater intensity east of the Ural Mountains in Siberia, where the overlay of Russian Orthodoxy is even thinner than in the remote parts of European Russia. David Lewis recounts being enrolled as an "honorary Mansi" in order to attend animal sacrifices in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Region, northeast of the Urals. He sees the assertion of paganism as a revolt against the Russianization that had been an integral part of communism.

I traveled much farther east last year to the Yakut Autonomous Republic (now renamed Sakha). As in Mari El, communist persecution had all but eliminated the Orthodox Church, which had first arrived in the region at the end of the 18th century. It had never taken as much hold among the indigenous people as it did among their European counterparts. An evangelism program was still in place in

1922 when the last bishop, Sofroni, was shot and all the churches were closed. Eventually a wooden hut on the banks of the River Lena in Yakutsk, the capital, was converted into an Orthodox church, the only one in this vast region—a region bigger than all of Western Europe.

Now Bishop German, the first bishop of the new diocese, faces a superhuman task. He told me that he has established 42 parishes but can find only 17 clergy to staff them, only one of whom is a Yakut. As a result of Russian colonialism 60 percent of the population is Russian, but very few of the Russians living outside the two or three sizable towns are within reach of a church. In contrast, the less numerous indigenous people can easily get to sacred groves, rivers, stones or hills in the forests or on the northern tundra.

I was in Yakutsk as part of a three-year project sponsored by the Pew Charitable Trusts and carried out by Oxford University's Keston Institute and its Russian research team, which is visiting almost all the 89 political regions into which Russia is divided. The study's purpose is to ascertain what Russia's many denominations and religions are up to at the turn of the millennium. The eventual aim is to produce an encyclopaedia of the religions of contemporary Russia.

In Yakutsk we met a local pagan leader (he declined to call himself a shaman), Ivan Ukhkhan, who spoke with passionate intensity about his beliefs. This educated man explained that the local spirits are theoretically subject to a supreme god, the sun (fire), but that paganism is pantheistic rather than incipiently monotheistic. The whole of creation is made up of ten heavenly circles, with mankind in the lowest and Aiyy, the creator god (the sun), in the highest. The strength of life (syur) flows downwards and animates the soul (kut) of every individual. Extrasensory perception is the gift given to the true believer. To preserve one's kut beyond the grave is the goal of life, but the kut can be captured by spirits or evil shamans along the way.

The nine commandments of Aiyy resolve themselves into a formula not too different from the ethical systems of the major religions: "Do not commit adultery; respect nature; work hard; do not destroy or kill; seek out your talents; tell the truth; attain the truth through study; protect your kut; respect the commandments of Aiyy." The religion also puts great emphasis on the kind of practical wisdom that helps people to survive in Siberia's harsh natural environment. A similar adaptability helped the religion to survive under communism. When one pagan group was ordered to dismantle a totem pole over which libations were poured, they simply placed a bust

of Lenin on top and continued as before.

Yakut paganism is a proselytizing religion. Bishop German, a moderate and humane figure, has been sharper in his criticism of the pagan revival than have the Orthodox in Mari El. At the same time, his work has been hampered by weak financial support from the state, while Protestants, especially Pentecostals, have moved with great vigor, setting up local-language congregations across the region. Under the energetic leadership of a Slovak priest whose previous missionary work was in Africa, Roman Catholic youth work is also developing apace in Yakutsk. We heard a telling generalization from a Protestant layman: “Orthodoxy is too national; it’s the faith of the Russians, while Protestantism and Catholicism are faiths for everyone.”

Among the many other beliefs that have rushed in to fill the void left by the communist state’s dethroning of God, the most notable is the widespread revival of the Rerikh Movement. Nikolai Rerikh (1874-1947) was a great syncretist. His roots were in the mystical movements of pre-revolutionary Russia. To his Russian Orthodoxy he added freemasonry, spiritualism, and a huge dose of the Yoga, Hinduism and Buddhism that were a legacy of the many years he lived in the Himalayas.

Most intriguing of all, Rerikh added to this soup a peppering of communism, pacifism and vegetarianism (the last two very strange to most Russians). He adored Lenin and in 1925 returned briefly from his residence abroad to be received by Lenin’s circle, including his widow. He paid his respects to his “brother, Mahatma Lenin,” and left behind a chest of Himalayan soil for Lenin’s grave.

Consequently, the Rerikh Movement did not call down upon itself quite the wrath visited on other religions. Some people believed that Rerikh was the reincarnation of St. Sergius of Radonezh, the most influential of all the Russian saints of antiquity. The movement strengthened when Rerikh’s son, Yuri, returned to Russia in 1957. An exhibition of Rerikh’s paintings (he was a talented artist) in Moscow in 1960 evoked enormous interest.

Lenin retains a special place in the movement’s pantheon. One of the movement’s many subgroups, the Vsevolod Unity Communist Party, based in Volgograd, proclaims that Rerikh veneration has led its members to believe that Lenin will return. In 1996 a woman brought her chronically ill son to representatives of the VUCP, who claimed that they could feel a colossal dose of cosmic energy emanating

from his body. He must, they said, be the reincarnation of Lenin. The boy was subsequently cured, is now about ten years old—and the world awaits the emergence of the new young Lenin. The parallel with the way Tibetan supreme lamas are discovered is not hard to discern.

That paganism now is thriving in Russia is less surprising when one remembers that in the heyday of communism Leonid Brezhnev took up with faith healers and Russia became the center of world interest in UFOs. The revival of paganism in eastern Russia parallels the overwhelming spiritual force of the revival of the Orthodox faith in the country’s western heartland. Both testify to the spiritual hunger left unfilled by 70 years of communist rule.