



## How Kyldysin Became a God

*Udmurt People - Russia*

Inmar, the Creator God, needed help to guide the peasants with their harvests. So he ensured that Kyldysin remain immortal. As a result, Kyldysin no longer changed with the passing of time, no longer dried up and aged, but remained permanently healthy, regaining and retaining his former strength and vigour.

The farmers slowly became aware of Kyldysin's presence and began to seek out his advice on the intricacies of plants and their cultivation.

In the meantime, Inmar remained attentive to what was happening in the fields, and began to hear many farmers say things like: 'Kyldysin helped me a lot', or 'Kyldysin saved my crops'. These were words that pleased him greatly and caused him to meddle less and less in the affairs of the fields.

Thus, as time went on, people came to love Kyldysin dearly, inviting him into their homes, welcoming him to their meetings and parties. Not only that, many of them tried to be like him and, above all, not to displease or disappoint him in any way.

In those days, the farmlands were very wide, so wide that the boundaries between the crops resembled roads in their width. Kyldysin liked to walk along these 'roads' and through the fields, examining the buds of the plants, ascertaining how they were affected by changes in the atmosphere and, when the time came, assessing the crop yields according to which region they grew in, as well as according to the hours of sunshine or rainfall they had received in each region.

People got used to seeing Kyldysin wandering through the fields. Tall and stout, with white hair and a white beard, Kyldysin walked slowly, so as not to miss anything that might happen to the crops. He was always dressed in white, a white which, sometimes, made him appear to blend into the sky, against the horizon, on a sunny day. Perhaps this is the reason for the name by which people came to know him, a name that could be translated as "the man made of sky". Who knows? Perhaps it is because Inmar recreated him from the very stuff of the sky.

The fact is that the Udmurts began to wear white because they wanted to look like him. They had white shirts made for them and, in the spring and autumn, they covered themselves with a thick white *sukman*. Also, men began to wear white trousers, and both men and women would wrap their legs in white cloth to form their typical *onuchi* in the colder months.

But all these courtesies on the part of the country people did not change Kyldysin. Just as when he was a man, he would rise before sunrise immediately go out into the fields and not return home until the last farmers and their families had retired to their homes. Whenever anyone needed him, Kyldysin was ready to help.

Kyldysin did not like to tread on farmland unless it was absolutely necessary. And, if someone lost a single seed of grain, Kyldysin would find it and pick it up with exquisite care, even tenderness. This is because he thought that within each kernel hundreds, thousands of harvests were compressed, and he thought that this should not, and could not, be lost. He thought that there were too many people in the world who had nothing to eat and that such a wealth of food should not be wasted. Sometimes when he came across a stalk of wheat on a road, he would surround and protect its root with pebbles. This was to mark it so that no one would tread on it.

The people, seeing the loving care and tenderness with which Kyldysin treated the plants, came to imitate him. They appreciated what those humble plants gave them and wanted to protect every seed, every ear of wheat in their fields.

Kyldysin kept no secrets from the farmers. Whenever they asked him, he would gladly give his advice on when to sow, in which field and with what kind of grain, all depending on the character of the plants and

their peculiarities. He knew that oats and barley are familiar to each other, but each has its own quirks and habits. However, he also advised the farmers about the type of weather each year would bring, because sometimes the spring might arrive early or last longer, while at other times the rains could come late or not arrive on time.

‘Each year has its own peculiarities and its own personality,’ Kyldysin told them, ‘and so does the soil of each field: some soils are more generous, while others are harder to work; some are sown so as not to yield anything, while others bear fruit in abundance.’

However, best of all, not only did Kyldysin keep no secrets about plants and crops, but in addition he maintained a humble and receptive attitude. He was always ready to learn. Until then, the elders were the ones who observed the signs of winter, the rain, the snows, how and when mushrooms grew, when berries ripened, when birds made their nests and when animals mated. And, in this way, they got an idea of what spring and summer would be like. This made them valuable to their community. But, being aware that, with his arrival, the farmers might come to disregard the elders and forget them, Kyldysin thought it would be unwise for the elders to lose their role. And, on the other hand, he felt that he himself still had a lot to learn. So he also went to the elders of each village to seek advice, and talked to each and every one of them, always maintaining a humble attitude. This made everyone, from the youngest to the oldest, love him dearly.

In time, this humble attitude led him to seek advice from the voices of nature, from all the beings he encountered, from those who inhabited the fields, the forests and the hills. People saw him talking to the branches of the trees, to the birds and the insects, to the frogs and fish in the rivers and to the animals hiding in the woods.

And so, with Kyldysin's wisdom, people lived well in Udmurtia, having sufficient food between harvests, with bread in the larder of every house. It was not for nothing that Kyldysin was eventually placed alongside the three main Udmurtian deities, alongside Inmar and Kvaz', as god of agriculture and fertility, of women, childbirth and children, and as protector of the poor. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2022).

## Comments

It seems that in its ancestral, possibly Neolithic origins, Kyldysin was not a god but a goddess, hence their patronage over fertility, women, births and children. On the other hand, in many traditions Kyldysin appears as a god who formerly lived among humans, according to the field materials of Uno Holmberg (1914), 'Inmar is a god, Kylchin [Kyldysin] is a saint. Inmar gave Kylchin power to create everything, and he created. He taught people how to live, work and pray to god'. This is the perspective we have used in this adaptation: that of a human being who ends up being deified.

Udmurt mythology is an anthropomorphic animistic mythology in which forests, mountains, rivers, houses and even granaries have their own spirit, to whose name is added the word *murt*, meaning 'man' (Domokos, 2018).

The Finnish ethnic origin of the Udmurts can be traced back to their main deity, the creator Inmar, who is the Udmurt version of the Finnish Ilmarinen. But each area worshipped its own combination of deities, which could also change over time. Among the most widespread deities of Udmurtian spirituality are, in addition to Inmar, god of the sky, Kyldysin, god of the earth, Kvaz', god of the atmosphere and climate, Lud or Keremet, god of meadows and fields, Njulesmurt, lord of the forests, as well as a wide variety of family guardians (Frog, Siikala and Stepanova, 2012).

This form of paganism proved particularly resilient to the influx of Turkish Islam and Russian Orthodox Christianity, which began to creep into the region between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. But Christianisation took place more by political imposition rather than by conversion, since it was from 1557 with the advent of Ivan the Terrible, that paganism began to be suppressed. As a result sacred groves, prayer sites and burial places were destroyed (Filatov and Shchipkov, 1997).

By 1917, Udmurt paganism was no longer repressed by the authorities, thus reviving Udmurt ethnic nationalism. But in the 1930s,



repression returned with much more violence. High priests and shamans were declared enemies of the people, and worship was banned. The large granaries, where worshippers congregated, and family shrines were destroyed, and the sacred groves were cut down and uprooted (ibid.).

When perestroika came, the Udmurt people's circumstances took a dramatic turn. By then they constituted only one third of the population of the Republic of Udmurtia, and the historical trauma, as well as the massive uprooting of their traditional cultural roots, had led to extremely high rates of alcoholism and suicide (ibid.). This is a similar phenomenon to the one experienced by traditional peoples around the world who suffered collective historical trauma and were disengaged from their cultural roots. An example is that of the Native American peoples (Yellow Horse Brave Heart, 2011), especially the Lakota People in the United States, who continue to be immersed in such a nightmare (Bosman, 2015).

From the 1990s onwards the ethnic and cultural identity of the Ummurt People awakened, and their native religion became the foundation of this movement. Indeed, in 1994, a large group of intellectuals, artists, academics and business people founded the *Udmurt Vos* – 'Udmurt Faith' – an institution which then sought to appoint genuine high priests of the ancient cult in order to rekindle the ancestral spirituality of this people (Filatov and Shchipkov, 1997).

Nowadays, the ancient Udmurt religion is alive again, albeit concentrated in villages and rural settings, where almost the entire population participate in rituals (Toulouze and Niglas, 2017). Many of these rituals consist of ceremonies or feasts in sacred forests. However, changes to the Russian Constitution, which took place in 2020, are an obvious attempt to Russify the Udmurt population by recognising the Russian language and ethnicity as the 'creators' of the state. This suggests that Russian culture and language take precedence over the other 35 languages spoken in the federation. Furthermore, it places the Ummurt language as an optional language in schools. This endangers the survival of this language which, according to the UNESCO Atlas (Bustos, 2021), is already endangered.

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### *Associated text of the Earth Charter*

Principle 9b: Empower every human being with the education and resources to secure a sustainable livelihood, and provide social security and safety nets for those who are unable to support themselves.

### *Other passages that this story illustrates*

Principle 13a: Uphold the right of everyone to receive clear and timely information on environmental matters and all development plans and activities which are likely to affect them or in which they have an interest.

Principle 13f: Strengthen local communities, enabling them to care for their environments, and assign environmental responsibilities to the levels of government where they can be carried out most effectively.

Principle 14: Integrate into formal education and life-long learning the knowledge, values, and skills needed for a sustainable way of life.

