



Kvaz's Chosen One

Udmurt People - Russia

Okylna had been doing her prayers in her small family shrine for years – eighty times a year, the precepts of her religion said – and she liked to participate in each and every communal prayer and offering in the sacred groves. It is for this reason, and perhaps also because of her unbridled imagination, that Inmar, the cosmic creator god, Kyldysin, the god of the earth and creatures, and Kvaz', the god of weather and atmospheric phenomena, held her in such high estimation. But of them all, it was the celestial Kvaz' who prized her most dearly.

It happened in the years of her life that a lengthy drought broke out in her region. For two years, the rains dwindled and the crops reduced their bounty to the point that, by the third spring, Okylna and her husband realised that they would not have enough food to get them through the following winter.

Okylna encouraged her husband to go to the sacred grove to make an offering to Kvaz' and ask him to make rain fall on their fields, but the man, who was quiet and pragmatic, didn't believe much in all that stuff about the ancestral gods of their people. She would have done it on her own, without prompting him, but women were forbidden to celebrate sacrifices and offerings, let alone enter the keremet', the most exclusive area of the sacred groves. So, drawing on her vivid imagination, she turned to Kvaz' in one of her prayers at home and asked how she could duly make an offering to him to bring rain to their fields.

‘What matters is not who makes the sacrifice, but the nature of the heart that is sacrificed in exchange for a gift,’ the slender Kvaz’ replied in her imagination.

‘But, if I go to the sacred grove and someone sees me there presenting my offering, word will spread among my neighbours that I have desecrated the place,’ she protested.

‘I will show you a sacred place in another grove just for you,’ said Kvaz’.

Okylna wasn't sure if she wasn't fooling herself, if what she had experienced in her imagination was nothing more than a figment of her fantasy. But, having nothing to lose, she chose to follow the indications that might come to her from that inner world.

‘I don't think I fall into any desecration,’ she said to herself. ‘After all, I belong to a family of priests. In fact, my father was a *vös'as*.’

The next morning, after her husband left to work in distant fields, Okylna put the elements of her offering in a basket: bread, butter and honey, *sur* beer, and everything needed to make a few porridges of wheat, *dzhuk*, and sourdough pancakes, *taban*'. To all this she added a silver coin, a real sacrifice for her, considering the situation in which she and her husband found themselves. Finally, she dressed in her most special attire, a white dress with maroon bands and multicoloured embroidery, and left the house imagining that Kvaz' was leading the way.

She had not yet gone a league, when Kvaz' directed her to turn off the path and descend a steep hillside, at the bottom of which she came upon a forest she had never seen before. Following the guidance of the god in her imagination, Okylna finally came to the foot of a gigantic fir tree by a stream.

‘This will be your *keremet*,’ Kvaz' said to her when she got there.

The place was dreamlike. She could never have found a more suitable place to make her offerings to Kvaz'. And, moreover, at the foot of a formidable fir tree, the tree consecrated to Kvaz'.

Wasting no time, Okylna said a prayer before entering what seemed to be the sacred space, and then arranged everything to make her offering, cooking the porridge and pancakes.

After saying her prayers and asking for rain for their fields, she made the food offering and buried the silver coin at the foot of the great tree. Then she fell asleep there, with her head resting on one of its roots.

‘You have done well, my dear,’ said Kvaz’, appearing to her in her sleep. ‘Tomorrow I will bring rain to your lands.’

When she woke up, Okylna gathered everything, came out of the *keremet*’ and said a prayer of farewell and thanksgiving. She then headed home, not without some haste, lest her husband arrive before her and she had to tell him about the ‘folly’ on which she had embarked.

The following morning, the rains began to fall gently on the lands of Okylna and her husband in the vicinity of the village; but apparently Kvaz’ forgot about the lands they had in the fields further away. So Okylna turned to Kvaz’ again in her imagination and asked him why he had not rained on those other fields. The god excused himself and asked her to return to the *keremet*’ of the fir tree to specify where all their fields were located. But, a while after talking to Kvaz’ in her imagination, an idea crossed Okylna’s mind.

‘And what will happen to my neighbours,’ she wondered, ‘They don’t deserve to go hungry during the coming winter. What if I ask Kvaz’ to make it rain on their lands as well?’

The next day, when her husband had departed, Okylna repeated the arrangements made two days earlier and added two silver coins, and then set off in her best attire for the *keremet*’ of the great fir tree.

Once there, she repeated the various steps of the ritual and listed, in her prayer, not only the lands that belonged to her and her husband, near and far, but also the lands of all her neighbours in the village.

Okylna thought she saw Kvaz’ smile when she made her request, as if the god was pleased that she had thought of her neighbours as well, but she would not ask, lest she make him uncomfortable. To inconvenience a god is the last thing a mortal should do.

And the next day, a fine but abundant rain was soaking the village lands until well after sunset.

Okylna was finally convinced that her imagination was not just a fantasy, but that she really could reach the god through those mental images. And this led her to come up with even bigger and more generous ideas.

‘What if I were to ask Kvaz’ to shower his rains not only on the lands of the village and the shire, but also on the lands of all the Udmurt people?’ she asked herself with tears in her eyes, thinking of the poorest children in the country. ‘Then no one will go hungry beyond our horizons.’

Of course, the next day, when her husband had departed, Okylna repeated the preparations of the previous days. This time, however, she added five silver coins, the coins that she had been saving, unbeknownst to her husband, in case they found themselves in real need and without any help.

Okylna looked at those coins, doubting for a moment whether it would be madness to part with them, until, finally, she put them into a pocket of her dress and set off for the *keremet*’ of the fir tree by the stream. And once there, after praying before entering the place, arranging everything and cooking the wheat porridge and the sourdough pancakes, when it was time for the sacrifice and the offering to the god, when it was time to bury the five silver coins at the foot of the fir tree, Okylna suddenly thought that why not ask for rain for all the people of all the lands in the world, however unknown and strange they might be.

And so she did in her imagination.

Kvaz’ laughed as she could never have imagined him laughing and, surrounding her in an aura of lights of all colours, he said to her:

‘I knew that your generosity deserved my attentions. Let it be as you ask, then, and let it rain upon the whole earth as a blessing from your heart for the good of all mortals.’

And the rain fell all over the earth softly and gently for several weeks. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda and Alena Karpava (2024).

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Comments

On Udmurtia and Udmurt culture and spirituality, see the Commentary section of another Udmurt story belonging to The Earth Stories Collection entitled ‘How Kyldysin Became a God’, published in Volume 2 of this Collection.¹

This traditional tale originally features an Udmurt male protagonist and, as explained in the text, women were – and are – forbidden to officiate as *vös’as’* – priests – and to enter into the *keremet’* – the sacred space – according to the prescriptions of the pagan and animist spiritual tradition of the Udmurt People. However, in our adaptation we wanted to make the ‘hero’ a ‘heroine’ in order to adapt the traditional narratives of the world to the new historical and social contexts, as well as to the multiculturally agreed ethical framework proposed by the Earth Charter. In this case, we refer specifically to Principle 11b of the Charter, which urges us to ‘Promote the active participation of women in all aspects of economic, political, civil, social, and cultural life as full and equal partners, decision makers, leaders, and beneficiaries.’

This is not meant in any way to offend believers in the Udmurt spiritual tradition, nor is it intended to force any change in their rituals. We simply seek to rethink traditional stories from other perspectives that can open doors to a new perception of social reality.

As to whether it is legitimate to make such changes to traditional stories from the world, we can refer to the developments by Milojević and Izgarjan (2014), who point out that the creation of alternative versions of traditional stories is a valuable tool for developing critical thinking and fostering diversity of thought. Moreover, as Carrillo (2005) remarks,

There is always more than one interpretation of the same myth. It occurs to me that this is due to the personal experience that each

¹ You can also download this story at the following link: <https://theearthstoriescollection.org/en/how-kyldysin-became-a-god/>

person may have in relation to the myth. The myth will always be the same, but not the experience that each individual has of it. This is precisely what makes the myth a collective and not an individual phenomenon; it is like a root from which the different branches of a great tree grow. (p. 2)

Finally, Claude Lévi-Strauss also adds his views on the versions and adaptations of myths and traditional stories. According to him, we should leave aside the supposed problem of ‘the *true* version, or the *earlier* one’ of a myth or, for that matter, a traditional story. In fact, Lévi-Strauss (1955) defines ‘the myth [or the traditional story] as consisting of all its versions; to put it otherwise: a myth remains the same as long as it is felt as such’ (p. 435), and he adds ‘There is no one true version of which all the others are but copies or distortions. Every version belongs to the myth’ (p. 436).

For more information on this issue, see section entitled ‘Sobre las adaptaciones’ (On adaptations) (pp. 341-350) in my PhD thesis (Cutanda, 2016).

Thanks to Professors Ольга Солодянкина (Olga Solodyankina) and Аверин Александр (Alexander Averin) for their generous research work at the Udmurtia State University to find traditional Udmurt stories for The Earth Stories Collection. Thanks also to Lola Mazagaeva for translating the source story and, most especially, to Alena Karpava, Professor at the University of Granada, Spain, for establishing the bridge for this collaboration, for reviewing the translation and for her contribution in the adaptation of this story.

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Associated text of the Earth Charter

The Way Forward: We must imaginatively develop and apply the vision of a sustainable way of life locally, nationally, regionally, and globally.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Principle 7c: Promote the development, adoption, and equitable transfer of environmentally sound technologies.

Principle 10a: Promote the equitable distribution of wealth within nations and among nations.

Principle 11b: Promote the active participation of women in all aspects of economic, political, civil, social, and cultural life as full and equal partners, decision makers, leaders, and beneficiaries.

Principle 12: Uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well-being, with special attention to the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities.

