



Boys in Argayash, 2015
(All photographs by G. Galiullina)

Sabantuy: An Ancient Festival Reborn

From the time man discovered agriculture and formed communities, spring planting and fall harvest were occasions for celebration. Even before that rituals were practiced in all cultures throughout history differing only by geography and particular activity to celebrate. For the most part food and children were the focus because of the necessity for mankind's survival. Today these ancient rites survive in mostly symbolic form, but they persist in people's spirit and manifest in surprising modern style.

Recently, I had the opportunity to visit Argayash, in the area I was raised as a Bashkir girl, in Kurgan Oblast. Chelyabinsk, the Capital city is a modern and now thriving city in the southern Ural region of Siberia. It is known around the world today for the meteor that exploded in the sky over the city in 2013.

Bashkirs are indigenous people of the Urals, having ancient roots along the plains of Central Asia and mountains of southern Russia. Originally nomadic

peoples, the Bashkir's were famous for domesticating the horse and supplying merchant's horsepower needed to drive trade along the Silk Road. Agriculture became increasingly important and seasonal rebirth of grassland was celebrated in Sabantuy – meaning the end of spring planting. Over time, the holiday become a symbol of national revival for these ancient people of Russia.

Sabantuy in Argayash this year coincided with Independence Day of Russia, and I was lucky to see the Bashkir festival in all its glory. Riot of color in harmony with national clothes and ornament of fancy yurts- the traditional temporary home built on the prairies as Bashkirs moved with their herds of horses and sheep.



Building the yurt in Kurgan Oblast, 1908

Each yurt had unique decoration on the walls and carpets. Villagers enjoyed the hospitality and guests tasted honey and tea from a samovar, air bread baked in home ovens, pilaf and beshbarmak – a kind of meat pie eaten with fingers. Buza, cooked according to ancient recipes, was the only alcoholic drink in sight throughout the party.



Women in traditional Bashkir dress, Argayash, 2015

I was pleasantly surprised to see no drunken festival goers, or even anyone slightly tipsy. I never saw even one of them. This is a separate reason for joy - to see a new generation of Bashkir happy without wine! In the terrible days of the 1990's, western imposed shock therapy ruined many communities throughout Russia and Bashkir villages often were ruined as well. The population was decimated by poverty and social disintegration, and Sabantuy turned into the apotheosis of the feast with rampant drunkenness during these plague-ridden days. So, I was very pleased to see these effects were nowhere leftover in the area I called home so many years ago.

Part of Sabantuy, of course, included traditional competitions: horse racing, pole climbing, kuryash (national wrestling), but I was interested in other evidence of the revival of my people. And I was lucky!

I met Guzel - police officer with dazzling beauty and harmony of a princess, accompanied by her three children (Just have a look at her daughter!), and the youngest little boy, solemnly seated in the child carriage.



Guzel with her children, 2015

Argayashsky district now leads in fertility in the Chelyabinsk region and holds this leadership for 7 years as 800 newborns a year outpace mortality nearly two to one. Bashkirs are growing again and one well-known businessman (a gynecologist in the past) once told me that women only have children if they feel a positive environment and willingly give birth if life is getting better all around.



Girls in Argayash, 2015

In Argayash area there is still a Soviet farm called Akbashevsky. The Director, Nurali Zaripov, is an impressive figure - completely gray head and young face with sensual joyous mouth. Knowing that I came from Washington, he asked me to tell President Obama warm thanks for sanctions. "Everything that we produce in our farm is now in demand, we do not even have time to respond to all of the growing demands of the market. Therefore, sanctions for us – are good. If there will be more, we will be happy. Take a look at this table - see what an abundance of delicious food we set out? "



Delicious selection of food for festival

Circulating among the gathering I happened upon Nail Khayrullin, CEO IZET.ru, a telecommunications company. He surprised me by noting how Bashkir parents do not try to educate children to be ambitious. We shared the observation that this tendency was unfortunate as parents urged their children to be satisfied with what they have. But, Khayrullin added that to be satisfied with what we have, children tend to then seek nothing better for themselves and their family. He added, “The child should strive for high goals, learn to reach them through hardship and hard work! “

I move to yet another yurt where a boiling samovar attracts by its sparkling polished finish. The hostess table offers treats of pilaf with fresh horsemeat and lush homemade bread. The Bashkir honey, known around the world, smells of fresh linden blossom. Tea from a samovar - the most delicious in the world!



Galima Galiullina at Sabantuy, 2015

Pausing to smile at a woman greeting me I am surprised at her words. “I am so glad to see you! I am so happy to meet you” – the smiling woman sitting at the tea table suddenly said in English.

Me too - I responded automatically. But she repeated the phrase, and I asked why she is so happy. She replied: “I once upon a time took notes - word by word- of your speech about how it’s important for Bashkirs to be competitive in a competitive world. I teach students English and teach them to be successful using your recipes.”

Truly, you never know how your words resound, but very heartwarming all the same!

Later we drive through the streets of Argayash to visit the historian Rashid

Khakimov, who I am grateful for the invitation to Sabantuy. Along the way he observes people have gradually rid themselves of the fear to stand out, to be different.

“Look at the house - now everyone is trying to make his home different from others. One farmer wanted a pool in the house - and now you can see this house! In Soviet time he could not think of such! People learn to realize their dreams and build beautiful homes. Fear goes away, freedom comes.”

I am so glad to know Bashkirs have regained confidence in the future, seeking to fill the freedom by creation, to create a strong and large family. Through a lot of hard work on the ground, these families give children an education and hope for a bright future, although tuition fees for many of them noticeably bite the pocketbook.

Experience of the ancient Bashkirs, the memory of the national hero Salavat Yulaev provide a source for the invincibility of the Spirit. The power of their native land and its beauty - what else do people need for a happy life in a reviving nation?

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