

# FOLKLORICA

Journal of the Slavic and East European Folklore Association

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FOLKLORICA: Journal of the Slavic and East European Folklore Association  
(Formerly SEEFA Journal)

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Cover: An icon depicting the Venerable Stoina Dimitrova (1883-1933), a 'living saint' from south-eastern Bulgaria (photo by Petko Ivanov)

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**A Message from the SEEFA Executive Board:**

Beginning with the current issue it has been decided SEEFA Journal should henceforth be known as **Folklorica: Journal of the Slavic and East European Folklore Association**. The name-change has been prompted by the desire to reflect the fact that the journal is an international publishing outlet, not solely an association journal. It is also thought that a title that highlights folklore will make it more identifiable.

## **Guidelines for contributors**

Folklorica welcomes contributions (articles, reports, reviews etc.) on all aspects of Slavic as well as East and Central European folklore. Articles should be original (i.e. not published earlier), but the journal may sometimes publish items that are felt to be of sufficient interest to those of our reading public, who may not be familiar with the language or publication in which the original appeared. In such cases, a footnote should be appended to the title, indicating where the article has been published before, whether in part or whole.

Contributors should note that they should make themselves available by email for editorial queries.

### Submission format

Potential contributors are requested to take careful note of the journal's house rules given below, and where these do not answer all questions to look at articles in the current issue or on the SEEFA website:

<http://www.virginia.edu/~slavic/seefa/INDEX.HTM>

All contributions should be submitted electronically as email Word attachments. Reviews should go to the Reviews Editor; all other contributions to the Editor. Their addresses are given below. If submitted on floppy disk, contributions should be Microsoft Word documents for PC (not ASCII or WordPerfect documents). If a submission contains diacritics, a separate hard copy should be sent.

Preference is given to submissions in English.

### Style

In general, submissions should adhere to the presentational practice of this issue of the journal. More specifically:

(i) Translation

Translations must not be literal; the translator should strive to produce a text that will be comprehensible to an English reader unfamiliar with the original language.

(ii) Transliteration

All words and quotations in a language using the Cyrillic alphabet must appear in the Library of Congress transliteration system; Folklorica does not publish Cyrillic text. Please note that in the case of East Slav languages the soft sign must be indicated through the use of an apostrophe (e.g. fol'klor).

(iii) Referencing system

The name/date format is to be used, with references in the body of the text in square brackets (e.g. [Smith 1995a: 2-4], and full bibliographical references in a separate bibliography at the very end.

Notes, which must be endnotes, not footnotes, should appear as standard text rather than formatted endnotes.

(iv) Stylistic points

- \* Foreign words should be italicized
- \* Plurals of foreign words should not be anglicized, as for example: one *bylina*, two *byliny* not *bylinas*.
- \* It is essential to include the overall editor(s) name when referring to one contribution in an edited volume of collected papers. This should follow the title of the article/chapter as follows: In J. R. Bloggs (ed.), Death Customs for the Uninitiated.
- \* Titles of articles should be placed in double quotation marks.
- \* In articles only words that would normally be capitalized are capitalized.
- \* Titles of books and journals should be underlined.
- \* In English book titles all adjectives and nouns are capitalized.
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- \* In the translation of article and book titles that follows each title in foreign languages other than French or German, the same practice as regards capitalization of letters as detailed above should be observed, but without either the initial quotation marks for articles or the underlining for books.
- \* Folklorica follows normal US practice in placing quotation marks the other side of punctuation (e.g. this constitutes “mythmaking,” in ...)
- \* Footnote numbers follow the punctuation without a space. Where this does not cause confusion, they should be placed at the end of a sentence.

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## ARTICLES

### Culture-Specific Meaning in Personal Narratives

Larisa Fialkova, University of Haifa, Israel

Maria Yelenevskaya, Technion-Israel Institute of Technology, Haifa

*Homo sapiens* has been defined as the creature who “makes sense,” and social sciences and humanities are all preoccupied with different aspects of meaning. The anthropologist Ulf Hannerz emphasizes the importance of sense-making, which occurs constantly through experience, interpretation, contemplation and imagination. The study of culture for anthropologists, therefore, is above all the study of meanings which people create, and which create people as members of society [Hannerz 1992:3]. Linguists, studying meaning and sense in natural language, are also increasingly concerned with cultural aspects of meaning. The study of semantic phenomena is shifting its focus from the abstract analysis of meaning and sense-making to cultural facts that exist in people and for people [Frumkina 1999:4]. Cultural psychologists are engaged in determining the role of culture for people, viewing it as a vehicle shaping human capacities. They believe that humans build their understanding of the world through active engagement with it in specific contexts carrying a history in the particular culture [Smith 2001:133]. Our ability to interpret the meaning of particular contexts and situations would be impossible without a reliance on a wider system of cultural formations (discourse, genres, activity types, institutions, modes of representation) that are not wholly contained in the immediate situation itself [Lemke 1997:49].

The quest for meaning has long preoccupied folklorists; indeed it became a central topic of discussion in the 1980s. The Eighth Congress of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research, held in 1984, was dedicated to meaning in both traditional and contemporary folklore. According to Lauri Honko, the current interest in meaning was triggered by new approaches to fieldwork, which had developed from “routine collecting into an exciting enterprise in problem-defining and problem-solving ... Personal contacts with informants and culturally rich contexts of performance are likely to raise questions concerning meaning in the observing scholar, especially in cases where the answers seem to hide in the extra-textual sphere” [Honko 1986:38]. The interpersonal nature of meaning in folklore stems from the interpersonal nature of culture itself. It is impossible to participate in a culture without sharing its signs, and members of a given society interpret signs according to their cultural patterns [Voigt 1999:118]. Folklorists perceive meaning not as a frozen construct, but as a dynamic process and a relationship between a situation (the folklore product) and a person (the listener or analyst), who experiences it [e.g. Brown 1986:92-93; Dégh 1983:147-48; Honko 1986a:40-41; Honko 1986b:99]. The degree of variation in meaning depends upon genre and context. Mary-Ellen Brown points out that less formal genres, performed and communicated in secular, informal contexts, are more likely to have multiple interpretations than more formal genres [Brown 1986:92]. This statement applies to the genre of personal narratives discussed in this essay. As a genre, personal narratives combine the features of communal

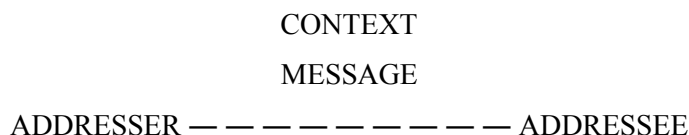
and private folklore [Dolby-Stahl 1985]. On the one hand they give listeners a glimpse of the storyteller's "inner life" and give access to his or her private thoughts and feelings; on the other hand they reflect systems of knowledge and meanings, symbolic templates and sets of values and beliefs which are culture-specific and shared by a given community.

The aim of this essay is to show both the process and the outcome of changes in meaning in the personal narratives of former Soviet citizens in Israel. These are a popular sub-genre of immigrant folklore. The source material for the essay came from face-to-face interviews conducted in 1999-2002 with immigrants to Israel from the former Soviet Union (FSU). The total sample comprised 119 interviews with 138 immigrants from the 1990s, amounting to approximately eighty hours of recording, transcribed in full.<sup>(1)</sup> In several cases family members and friends preferred group interviews to individual ones, and this accounts for the mismatch in the numbers. The interviews were conducted in Russian, the mother tongue of both interviewees and interviewers. All the participants in this study, as well as the authors, emigrated to Israel in the 1990s. The subjects were found in "snow-ball" fashion. The contexts of the interviews varied; some conversations were held in the homes of interviewers or interviewees, others in offices, still others in public places, such as parks or beaches. In general, the interviews present personal narratives that included such subgenres as memorates, novellas, and supernatural tales (*bylichki*). Additionally, they incorporate traditional and contemporary folklore genres such as jokes, proverbs, and satiric verses (a popular genre of Soviet urban folklore) [Belousov 1998:545-57]. Besides narratives proper, that is to say, complete and structured stories [Labov and Waletzky 1966; Labov, 1972], the interviews contain reflective monologues and dialogue exchanges. Seventy one stories told in the course of the interviews have been selected for preservation in the Israeli Dov Noy Folktale Archive (IFA). The folklore of immigration is one of the central themes in the IFA holdings. Among the main criteria used for selecting personal narratives for IFA is their structural and thematic proximity to traditional and contemporary folklore as well as the use of images derived from it. Most of the texts are in Hebrew, but in the last two decades stories have tended to be recorded in the language of the original. If a narrative is in Yiddish, Arabic, Russian and so on, it is preserved in that language as well as in Hebrew or English translation. To date, approximately 500 texts have been recorded in Russian.

Additional sources used in the analysis are the authors' own diaries containing ethnographic observations, material drawn from the Russian mass media, Russian-language newspapers in Israel, and Russian-language internet discussion groups.

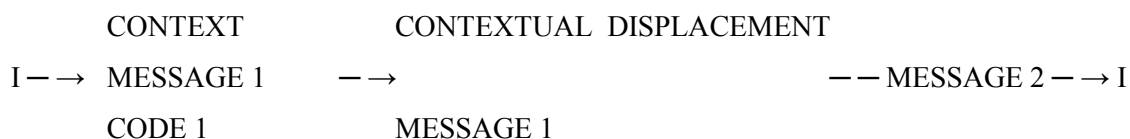
Scholars interested in culture are often reproached for over-theorizing, their remoteness from life and concrete cases, as well as an excessive emphasis on artifacts, such as magazines, films or academic books [Billig 1997:205]. Our approach is different: we concentrate on our subjects' life experiences, their feelings and thoughts, and turn to cultural artifacts to explain how shared meanings and views evolve. Today, when the communicative channels of folklore have changed and become less dependent on oral transmission, storytellers often reproduce or allude to the media and various products of popular culture [Kvideland 1990:17].

The understanding of culture in all its complex forms is inseparable from the study of communication. This is why the concepts and models developed by communication theorists have been transferred and applied to culturology [see Berry and Epstein, 1999: 18-22, on the parallels and differences between culturology and cultural studies]. One of the better known communication models is that proposed by Roman Jakobson in the article “Linguistics and Poetics” [Jakobson 1960:353].



$$\begin{array}{c} \text{CONTACT} \\ \text{CODE} \end{array}$$

The prominent Soviet culturologist and semiotician, Iurii Lotman, warned researchers against simplifications in the application of this model to culturological research. He regarded autocommunication, or “internal speech” (the term introduced by Lev Vygotskii) as an independent communication model. In the process of external communication, or in the “I-He” system, a text is introduced, encoded in the code’s system, transmitted and decoded. Given that communication seldom occurs without any interference, we frequently observe a decrease in information. In the process of internal communication, given a text that is encoded in a certain system, another code is introduced and the text is transformed. As a result of interaction with the new code an increase in information occurs. While in external communication the code constitutes the constant and the text is the variable, in internal communication the code constitutes the variable, and the texts differ at entrance and exit [Lotman 1977]. The scheme of communication in this case looks more complicated:



Lotman discussed the two communication systems in their application to fiction, while we are concerned with intercultural research into personal narratives. Semi-structured in-depth interviews are akin to diaries, which belong to the internal communication model “I-I.” In telling the interviewer the story of his/her immigration, an informant is trying to make sense of the past, to re-think and re-interpret it in light of experience acquired in the new country. Little wonder that many of the interviewees expressed gratitude for the opportunity of sorting out their experiences during an eventful and difficult period in their lives. On the other hand an interview is an external communication of the “I-He” type, or in this case, “I-She,” as both interviewees are women. If we take into account that each of the two types of communication includes its own constants and variables, in our interviews the number of variables increases: informants try to make sense of their past for



themselves; in this way a new code is introduced and at the same time the message is transmitted to another person, the interviewer. The constants are the language of communication, Russian, and a background knowledge of the realities of life in the FSU, Israel and the immigrant community. As Scollon and Scollon maintain, language is inherently ambiguous. In order to communicate we must always leap to conclusions about the speaker's meaning. We draw inferences from two main sources: the language used and our knowledge of the world. Furthermore, an essential element of this knowledge is our expectations of what people normally say in such circumstances [Scollon, Scollon 1995:10].

A degree of background knowledge is essential in formulating interview questions as well as for understanding and interpreting the answers. Ignoring interviewees' past experience can lead to misunderstandings and even a breakdown in communication. Moreover, in scholarly research it can lead to ambiguous results. A case in point are some of the sociological studies of immigrants from the FSU conducted in Israel. Questions about their education are based on the Israeli system and take twelve years' schooling as one of the basic categories. In inquiring into religious practices, the categories proposed are also those consistent with the Israeli situation: very religious, religious, traditional, non-religious [Ben-Rafael 1997:368]. The language of the question notwithstanding (Russian, Hebrew, English), the sense of these questions varies widely for addressers and addressees, as their different background knowledge functions here as the code. For an Israeli addressee, in this example the researcher, twelve years' education means that a respondent graduated from high school. For the addresser, the respondent from the FSU conscientiously answering the question about his/her educational level, the meaning of the category is obscure, because the length of study in various institutions of secondary and higher education was eight, ten, five or four years, but never twelve. As a result, to a former Soviet citizen twelve years' education could mean any one of the following:

- (i) Secondary school (ten years) plus two years at university
- (ii) Secondary school plus a two-year technical college (*tekhnikum*) training, e.g. a machine-building or teacher-training college
- (iii) "Incomplete" secondary school (eight years) plus four years at technical college
- (iv) Secondary school followed by vocational school, giving training for a variety of occupations (as turners, woodworkers, cooks, seamstresses, etc.)

To illustrate how misunderstandings caused by the different interpretation of concepts may arise, we quote a story told by Anatolii P.(2) Interpretation is understood here as the ability to extract appropriate meanings from signs and/or texts, and which involves familiarity with the meanings of signs in specific contexts, with the type of code to which they belong, and with the nature of their referents [Danesi 1999:26]. Anatolii believes that he was mistreated by a clerk in the Ministry of Education. The basis of the conflict was the discrepancy between the ten- and twelve-year school systems and the difference in the grading system for knowledge, percentages in Israel and a five-point system in the USSR.

Anatolii P., 26, emigrated from Leningrad in 1990, now living in Haifa and working as a sound operator (IFA 22054): And then there was school, on the first of September. Oh, yeah, and we go to *Misrad*

*Hachinuch* (Hebrew for Ministry of Education) .... And they say to me something like, “Well, well, fellow, you are... you are a sort of Down (Anatolii refers to Down syndrome.) Yeah, that is, this ... Well, and where was it? What building was it in? In Shekem? There was some *misrad* (Hebrew for office) in the building, and this old fart was sitting there. He had been sitting there for at least 150 years. And he says to my parents something like, “Well, well, he can’t go into the eleventh grade, he’ll hardly cope in the tenth.”

Interviewer: What made him think that?

Anatolii: Well, he was looking at my grades: “Yes, the grades are bad.” And I had 5 in English and 5 in sports. The rest were also sort of okay; that is 4 in geometry, well, 3 in algebra, 4 in Russian, 3 in chemistry, 3 in physics, 4 in biology, and a good behavior report. And yet he...and I see that my mum is looking at me like she was ready to bury me alive on the spot. That is, the situation is such that the best thing would have been to spit on his bald patch, but my mother is looking at me as though it’s all my fault. And what’s my fault? That he thinks that...and he automatically signs me up for the tenth grade!

Interviewer: That is, you...

Anatolii: That is nobody asked me. He immediately said, “You won’t be able to study.”

Interviewer: And age-wise were you going to be in the 11th grade?

Anatolii: Yes, I was going to be in the eleventh grade. Because in Russia I, sort of, had finished the tenth grade. In terms of a 12-year system I had finished the tenth grade. Although I had been studying for nine years, I had finished the tenth grade, and according to my age, I ought to be in the eleventh grade.

Interviewer: But he didn’t let you ...

Anatolii: No, he didn’t. And he was such a... but his eyes were SO KIND, SO KIND... Like in the joke about Grandpa Lenin. He (Lenin) is walking along the street with a loaf of bread in his hands. And there are hungry ...children there, they’re hungry and they say: “Grandpa, give us ...Grandpa Lenin, give us some bread.” “Get lost, kids, get lost.” But his eyes were SO KIND, SO KIND.

Anatolii’s integration into Israeli society was long and painful. He had resented the idea of immigration, and his first encounters with bureaucracy reinforced his rejection of Israel. The clerk may have acted with the best intentions and tried to prevent the new immigrant from falling behind his new classmates. He acted in terms of the twelve-year system, not thinking that nine-years’ education with grades that were mostly good or fair were equivalent to ten-years’ schooling in Israel. But the decision to “demote” Anatolii and put him into a class with younger students had the opposite effect. Both the interviewee and his mother said that it had demotivated him, and for a while he lost interest even in his favorite courses. Nine years after the incident, Anatolii was as upset as if he had suffered the unfairness the day before. It pained him that he was helpless vis a vis the clerk and that his mother chose not to support him. He compensated for his feeling of helplessness by using violent language in the narrative.

This passage is a good example of how the laws of oral narration formulated by Olrik function in personal narratives [Olrik 1965]. Firstly, it follows the Law of Opening and Closing: Anatolii divides up his story with an introduction and ends it with a joke summing up his experience. Secondly, the Law of Two to a

Scene leaves Anatolii's mother silent in the background. The active participants are the narrator and the official, and Anatolii uses direct speech to render the conversation. This enriches his performance as he imitates the clerk's body language and intonation. And thirdly, we see here multiple manifestations of the law of contrast: one is old, the other is young; the clerk has long tenure in Israel and knows how to pull the strings, while the family of newcomers has no experience or understanding of how things work in the new country, and finally, the bureaucrat is powerful and the immigrant is powerless.

In this passage we also see several features characteristic of the speech behavior of contemporary Russian speakers. The Russian linguist, T. M. Nikolaeva, classifies them as a tendency to enlarge facts and events; a dislike of single concrete facts; and a dislike of precise information [Nikolaeva 2000:123]. Firstly, we note Anatolii's tendency to hyperbolize, something typical of folk narrative: the clerk had been in that job for over 150 years, his mother was so angry that she was ready to bury her son alive, and the narrator was "diagnosed" an imbecile.(3) Typically, embellishment and exaggeration are used in describing unpleasant experiences, bad expectations, unfair treatment; hence the persistence of litany in the repertoire of speech genres among contemporary Russian speakers [Nikolaeva 2000, Reis 1997]. At the beginning of the story Anatolii repeatedly uses impersonal constructions. Although a characteristic feature of Russian syntax, in the context of this passage it has an additional feature presenting the narrator as confronting a multitude of anonymous subversive "they" figures. The multitude of hedge words, such as "well," "like," "sort of," "something of the sort," the repetition of the hypothetical form "as if" and false starts make Anatolii's statements imprecise and uncertain.

Instead of directly evaluating the situation, Anatolii cracks a joke about Lenin which functions as a commentary to his own story. As Lutz Röhrich observes, the joke seems to be the most important and vivid genre of folklore narrative in modern society, encompassing all sides of life, and which is determined socially as well as culturally and individually [Röhrich 1990:127, 135]. This genre was particularly important for a politically suppressed society such as the Soviet Union, where many themes were taboo in any other type of discourse. The most successful jokes were so often told, that like proverbs they acquired semiotic power. Many of our interviewees allude to them to describe situations and evaluate people and events. The pervasiveness of allusions to jokes is characteristic not only of informal discourse. Strikingly, many social scientists writing today about the Soviet and post-Soviet periods allude to the jokes in the same fashion as our informants [e.g. Brym 1994:21; Gitelman 1997:22; Remennick 1998:256; Rotenberg 2000:214; Ryvkina 1996:43, 44].(4)

A joke about Lenin cited by Anatolii was from a popular series of celebrity jokes. Official Soviet propaganda strove to create an idealized image of a wise, kind, strict but fair leader. The duality of the image has roots in the Christian tradition. Analyzing the evolution of Lenin's image in Soviet literature and propaganda, Mikhail Vaiskopf has shown that some of the leader's features emphasizing his power over the world were modeled on Jahweh, while his humanity imitated Christ's. His dual personality was frequently reflected in the description of his eyes, both kind and strict [Vaiskopf 2001:342]. The image of "the most humane of all humans" (Maiakovskii's oft-quoted phrase), however, was in sharp contrast with the folk image

of Lenin. Party leaders, as well as famous writers, artists, and prominent scientists, were also mythologized. Their biographies in school books were generally reduced to a listing of their moral virtues. In reaction to official ideology, a vast repertoire of jokes demythologizing the iconic figures of Lenin, Pushkin, Turgenev, Tolstoi, and so on circulated widely in the country. According to Muriel Saville-Troike, the use of metaphors, proverbs and jokes is a time-honored communication strategy for depersonalizing criticism [Saville-Troike 1984:36]. Our other informants, as well as participants in internet discussion groups, also use jokes and sayings widely, not just in order to express a criticism but also to prove a point, generalize a situation, or classify a particular experience. In many cases instead of telling the whole joke, narrators give only the punchline, which shows that the joke is used as a sign familiar to the addressee. In the nineteenth century the Russian philologist Alexander Potebnia was already analyzing the way folklore and literary texts such as fables are abbreviated in everyday communication [Potebnia 1976:509-29]. The modern-day Russian folklorist K. A. Bogdanov has expanded Potebnia's ideas, showing that the genres found in communication today have been expanded by allusions to phrases from popular songs and movies, as well as political slogans. He points out that "mutual understanding in a group is inconceivable without a silent presupposition that these texts are well known" [Bogdanov 2001:48].

As we have noted, the religiosity of our informants is also difficult to discuss through concepts appropriate for the veteran population of Israel. A high percentage of immigrants from the FSU to Israel are secular. In the perestroika years, when anti-religious propaganda in the USSR ceased, the population began to show an interest in religion. Jews started attending synagogues, to participate in Hanukkah and Seder Night "parties," while Russians, Ukrainians and others were no longer afraid of baptizing their children or going to church on major Christian holidays. This, however, did not affect the everyday life of large sectors of the urban population. At the same time there was an explosion of interest in extra-sensory phenomena, healing, and UFOs. Eclecticism of beliefs is characteristic of the post-Soviet period. As R. Ryvkina remarks, their concepts often do not reflect a religious worldview, but a general philosophical belief that "there is something somewhere guiding our life" [Ryvkin 1996:59]. In our sample this applied to Jews and non-Jews alike. Here we quote from the interview with an ethnic Russian, Inna P.

Inna P., 48, emigrated from Cheliabinsk, Russia, in 1992, now living in Haifa, an economist now employed as a cleaning woman (IFA 22053)

Interviewer: How do you feel in a country in which religion, well, is so closely connected to the state?

Inna: I feel good about it, because (pause) in some sense, I am a believer myself. I, I was baptized. And so my attitude is reasonable, even good. Yes, not simply reasonable, but good. Well, probably, with those Orthodox Jews ... they sort of, but I don't really, they don't have much to do with me. But religion, I, because I believe, I believe all of this. Well, not everything. But in any case, I think God created man; that is, he sent us. And we, with all our, with all our *baayotami* (Russified Hebrew for problems), with all the problems and well... No, my attitude is very positive.

Interviewer: Do you know that there is an Orthodox church in Haifa, a Russian Orthodox church?

Inna: Oh, oh, I was there once. And I didn't like it. In what sense? They simply didn't let me in. I learned...

Interviewer: But why?

Inna: Yes, I learned, the church is in Carmel (a district in Haifa), well ...

Interviewer: On *Shderot haNassi* and ...

Inna: Yes, Boris and I went there together, er, because, er, I don't remember why. Probably, when Keren (Inna's granddaughter) was born, and then again when she was five, and something was not right. Someone had put the evil eye on her, and we had (pause) to go to church and light a candle, or something of the sort. And, ha, excuse me, but I think the guy who came to the gate was a KGB officer. I rang, the gate was locked, I rang and he snubbed me completely, and that's all. And it was very ... So now, if I want to talk to God, and sometimes I do, if I want to do it, then I go to Stella Maris (a Catholic church in Haifa), and light a candle there. I apologize if it is not the right thing, because it is, well it's not Orthodox, it's Catholic. Well, God is One, and I light a candle there, I sit there for a while, I pray in my own way, because I don't know (any prayers) by heart. I don't know how to pray, but, but I sort of, talk to Him in my own way, I tell Him whatever there is to tell, and I walk around a bit. In the past, I don't know, whether it is because of the Arabs, or because of our people, but in the past there was a big, long lane near Stella Maris, and there were all those religious statues on it, well, you know those religious statues. And now, because they began roasting shashlyks there and all sorts of things, the alley is closed. I used to go for walks there. And the most important thing is that you walk there without being afraid that someone might jump out at you or something. Well, but the Orthodox church, I did, you know, after they gave me such a welcome, I didn't even try to go back.

As we can judge from the passage, Inna's notion of Christianity is vague and mixed up with folk belief, such as the power of the evil eye.<sup>(5)</sup> She is not familiar with dogma, nor does it matter to her which church she goes to, so long as she is well treated, can perform the few rites she knows, and spend some time in peace and quiet. She is apologetic about her non-standard approach to church-going and ignorance of prayers. She admits she is a believer "in some sense." What matters for her is her hope of receiving protection and help in coping with her problems. Such an attitude to religion is characteristic of many ex-Soviets, both inside Russia and out. Soviet ideology always presented the state as the protector of its citizens and guarantor of their future. Although in the last decades of Soviet power such propaganda was derided, it still impacts on psychology. Disappointed in its promises and exposed to new realities of insecurity and the necessity of making choices, people turned to religion for protection and comfort. As we see from this passage, church premises can also be perceived as the only place where the immigrant feels physically safe, even if this feeling is illusory.

Referring to the hostile behavior of the official of the Russian Orthodox Church, Inna likens him to a KGB officer. Many stories circulated in the USSR about the involvement of the KGB in the affairs of the church. Our narrator transfers this mythology to the Israeli soil, and makes sense of the new realities in terms of symbols related to her pre-immigration experience.

One further observation relating to attitudes to religion among the immigrants is based on several interviews with religious Christians. These interviewees are much more tolerant of Judaism than secular Jews. Although few subjects expressed militantly atheistic ideas, lack of respect for religion and the religious was not uncommon. And this brings us to the next topic, that is, what constitutes Jewishness for our informants?

In the Soviet Union Jews were viewed as an ethnic group with shared genetic characteristics. The systematic destruction of Jewish cultural institutions, the persecution of teachers of Hebrew and discrimination against religious believers made several generations of Soviet people, including the Jews themselves, forget the religious culture that defines and unites Jews wherever they live [Garfinkle 1997:5].

Arkadii T., 57, emigrated from Kharkov, an engineer now working as a home attendant

Arkadii: I thought, well, it might have been a primitive idea ... I thought that Jewishness is just blood. Let's compare, say Christians. Say he is a Catholic. Say, in England, Poland, former Russia or, say, Africa or Australia. But this African guy, from, say, Mozambique, doesn't become English, French or a Pole. It's just his faith. Well, with us, as we see, it doesn't really matter where you come from. A black Ethiopian or a *Taimanets*... In fact, how do you call a *taimanets*?

Interviewer: A Yemeni. *Taimanim* are people from Yemen.

Arkadii: Yemeni? Well, so this is what matters. The main thing is your faith.

Interviewer: And have you accepted that?

Arkadii: Yes. Absolutely, and without any ... Well, after all, why not? If this is what matters ... then may it be as long as he is, as they say, a true *ben-adam*, a proper human being.

It remains difficult for many immigrants to grapple with the concept of the Jew. In the Soviet Union the concepts of nationality and citizenship were separated, hence Arkadii's inability to understand that an African from a former French colony can be a French citizen. This misconception is not an idiosyncratic one, but was reported by other informants.

Apart from genetic features, our informants mentioned language, and Yiddish in particular, as the determining factor in defining the Jews. This is how it was put by Tamara Z., a fifty one-year-old engineer, from Zhitomir in Ukraine, now living in Haifa and working as a home attendant: "I still think that Jewishness, it must unite all Jews. Culture and everything should be united. And I think that if someone is Jewish, he must know Yiddish. And if he doesn't know Yiddish, he is not really a Jew."

A number of other interviews reveal that the definition of a Jew is based on an idealized image and includes such features as intellect, a sense of responsibility and humane character. Thus Arkadii is ready to come to terms with the fact that dark-skinned Yemenis and Ethiopians are Jewish if they are "proper human beings;" one other informant, Albert R. goes so far as to imply that malice cannot and should not be expressed in the "Jewish language." Equally mythical is the image of the Jew presented in the following excerpt from an interview with Anastasia N., 61, a biochemist who emigrated in 1990 from Kharkov, Ukraine, and now lives in Haifa: "The only thing which really upsets me here is that ... I had always thought that en masse Jews were very

intelligent. Intelligent and sensible; that is like Prometheus, seeing things ahead of time. And they turned out to be Epimetheus, every one, I think. Well, with few exceptions, just like everywhere else.”

The idealization of Jews as a group, which may have been a way of compensating for social inequality in the USSR, existed side by side with the desire of many Soviet Jews to distance themselves from everything Jewish. In some sense the Soviet legal system even encouraged Jews to give up their official ethnic identity. In the USSR children of mixed marriages could choose their mother's or father's ethnicity when they received their ID at the age of 16. Always prepared for a deterioration of the political situation and new surges of anti-Semitism, most parents instructed their children to register as non-Jewish. According to ethno-sociological research in the late 1980s, 90-95% of children from mixed marriages were registered as non-Jews [Dymerskaya-Tsigelman 2000:39].

The desire to undo all ties with Jewry was derided by Jews and non-Jews alike, and triggered the emergence of numerous jokes and sayings. Many of them were related to physical features, family names and patronymics. Let us compare two examples. In the first a teacher comes to class and says, “Children, tomorrow we are to host an Arab delegation. Rabinowitz, Haimovitz and you, Ivanov on your mother's side, stay at home tomorrow.” The other example is the jocular phrase “Ivanov, a Jew on his mother's side.” The two phrases look almost identical, but refer to two different situations. In the joke, “Ivanov on his mother's side” has a Jewish father so he is not a halachic Jew (i.e. not a Jew according to Jewish law). Nevertheless, he, too, is subject to anti-Semitic abuse. As a rule, children bore their father's name, although they could choose their mother's family name instead. But, as emerges from the joke, the mere change of name would not deceive a vigilant anti-Semite. In the second example, the father is Russian and the name has not been changed. Paradoxically, having a Jewish father made a person more of a Jew in Soviet terms. Although any person with a Jewish mother is a halachic Jew, in the Soviet mind the name Ivanov was only for Russians, and it was as much of a symbol of Russianness as Rabinowitz was a symbol of Jewishness; so a Jew bearing the prototypical Russian name, Ivanov, is a hilarious absurdity. At the same time both phrases could be used by Jews to indicate that these “ethnic marginals” belonged to the in-group and so were not rejected.

Boastfully calling itself “the family of brotherly nations,” the Soviet Union bred interethnic intolerance and xenophobia, which was frequently reflected in the language. It is from the Soviet Union that Russia inherited an underdeveloped culture of interethnic relations, in which citizens of a country are treated not as citizens but as “bioids,” species with different blood and facial features [Ryvkina 1996:137].

Soviet social realities triggered the appearance of the concepts of “half” and a “quarter” with reference to ethnicity. In addition, the expression “Jew on her mother's/father's side” were often used in earnest. Our sample provided the following example, recorded from Boris N., 59-year-old retired engineer, who emigrated from Tashkent, Uzbekistan in 1999, and now lives in Afula. He remarked: “My daughter [pause] went to university. Her friends seemed a peculiar bunch of people; that is, well, there were all sorts there, Uzbeks and Jews, and you know ... And then she goes and marries a Jew, well, a Jew on his father's side, yeah, a Jew on his father's side.” During the interview Boris, an ethnic Russian, boasted that all his life he had Jewish friends, who

always considered him “one of ours.” Yet, describing his daughter’s multi-ethnic environment he refers to its denizens as a “peculiar bunch of people” and people of “all sorts,” both phrases with slightly pejorative connotations. The outcome of such friendships, marriage to a “Jew on his father’s side” did not enthuse Boris, because it increased the possibility that his daughter, a “Jew on her mother’s side,” would emigrate, a possibility other family members were not considering at that time.

The concepts of “halves” outlived the Soviet system and is still widely used in the immigrant community. Recently one of the authors overheard the following conversation between two workers in a supermarket. One of them explained to her colleague how to make Uzbek dishes such as *plov*, *shurpa*, *hamsa*, and so on. The latter asked in surprise:

“How do you know all this?”

“Because I am half Muslim; after all, my father comes from Central Asia.”

[Cited from the authors’ ethnographic diaries.]

The far more intense exposure to Jewish culture in Israel than in the FSU, and even the knowledge acquired in the process of studying in Israel, have still proved powerless to expel the distorted Soviet concepts of ethnicity, ethnic identity, nationality and religion. Here are some more examples from our sample:

Leonid B., 36: “According to my ID I’m Belarusian.”

Ekaterina R., 24: “My father’s classmate ... and incidentally, if you are interested in nationality, he was a Muslim.”

Iakov K., 80, speaking to his colleagues on his retirement, said that in the Soviet Union he had never concealed his nationality and added, “I have never been religious, I have never been a Zionist, but I have always been a Jew!”

[The latter example is cited from the authors’ ethnographic diaries.]

A student from the University of Haifa submitted a course project, in which she interviewed immigrants from the FSU and then analyzed their narratives. On the form providing personal data about her interviewees she described one of them as “half Jewish, half Christian.”

Just as the new meaning of “halves” has gradually spread from the description of Jews to other ethnicities and even religions, another cliché of the Soviet era used in talking about Jews has become one element in the xenophobic vocabulary of the post-Soviet period. In the Soviet press and public discourse the word “Jew” was carefully avoided, as if it were pejorative. Instead, Soviet propaganda coined the phrase “persons of the Jewish nationality.” In his collection of words and expressions characteristic of Soviet newspeak, Benedict Sarnov refers to this absurd combination as a euphemism, a manifestation of the Soviet hypocrisy. The word “Jew” disappeared from public discourse in the USSR as if mentioned it was something shameful. But all its replacements, “rootless cosmopolitan” a “zionists,” and a “person of Jewish nationality” were political labels and were continuously used to unmask “enemies of the people”. Sarnov remarks they were no more than calques of “kike’s snout” [Sarnov 2002:221-27]. In the 1990s, the same “euphemism” was applied to people from the Caucasus. Whether they were Chechens, Ossetians or Circassians, they all came to be called



“persons of Caucasian nationality,” or “persons from the Southern nationalities.” Needless to say, these are mythological constructs. It is typical of an ethnocentric worldview to see various “others” as a uniform group, for example *aziaty*, *chornye*, *churki*, *uzbeki* (Asians, blacks, lumps, Uzbeks), all of them referring to people of non-European appearance. Such a usage not only expands the meaning of the words, it makes its connotational components prevail over denotational. Members of various ethnic minorities are sensitive to the contempt expressed in such labels, and this is reflected in folklore. Alexandra L., a pensioner from Moscow, told us a joke, the essence of which is a pun: the Russian word *litso* has several meanings, among them “face” and “person.” The joke runs as follows: “Advertisement: I would like to exchange the face of a Caucasian national for a kike’s snout. Additional payment guaranteed.” Since the beginning of the unrest in the Caucasus (ethnic conflicts in Nagornyi Karabakh and Abkhazia, and above all the Chechen war), xenophobic attitudes towards people from the Caucasus have become more marked than towards Jews. The joke implies that the social status of the Jew has greatly improved thanks to the possibility of emigration from Russia.

We have assembled an entire collection of texts containing the original cliché and its paraphrases. These range from academic essays to newspaper articles, published in both Russia and Israel. For example, when analyzing various waves of emigration from Russia, the linguist E. A. Zemskaja writes, “The third wave, to a large extent, consists of dissidents, persons of the Jewish nationality, and representatives of various creative and intellectual professions, who had to leave or were expelled from the USSR” [Zemskaja 2001:41]. The statement seems peculiar, not only because a linguist uses in earnest a cliché that has become notorious for its xenophobic connotations, but also because it implicitly includes Jews in the groups opposing Soviet power.

As a hint at the special status enjoyed by the residents of Moscow, a journalist from the popular weekly *Argumenty i Fakty* (Arguments and Facts) referred to them as “persons of Moscow nationality,” and in an article on Islamic terrorism the same paper expressed concern about the the rapid growth of the Arab population: “Today, sixty out of every hundred people in the world are “persons of the Arab-Asian nationality” [*Argumenty i Fakty* 2001:no. 42]. Increasing xenophobia in Russia mostly targets non-whites and are supported by the actions of the authorities. As Alaina Lemon has observed, in the post-Soviet years those termed “blacks” and “southerners” are routinely rounded up and driven out of Moscow for document violations [Lemon 1998:46].

In a growing number of texts allusions to the cliché are used to criticize and mock xenophobia. The Russian historian V. Diatlov entitled a chapter of his book on ethnic relations in Siberia: “Persons of geographic nationality: Migrants from the Caucasus in the socio-economic life of Irkutsk.” He points out that the gradually evolving notion of a *kavkazets* (a Caucasian) now frequently includes people from Central Asia [Diatlov 2000:91]. Here too, we can see the meaning of the word expanding.

In an article about the various difficulties confronting non-Jews in Israel, the Israeli journalist V. Martynova writes that “persons of a ‘mistaken nationality’ still cannot get married in Israel or invite members of their family to visit them” [Martynova 2002]. The most curious example of all is the title of an article by the literary critic Iu. Barabash, “‘Persons of the Basurman nationality’ in the writing of Gogol’ and Schevchenko” [Barabash 1999]. *Basurman* is an archaic word used to denote someone alien, a person of a different faith,

primarily Muslims. In contemporary speech it is used pejoratively to refer to people from Central Asia, Muslim clergy and even drug traffickers from Central Asia [Mokienko, Nikitina 2001:53]. Thus the Soviet stereotype can even be applied to the analysis of pre-Soviet literature, where it requires the addressees to make complex transformations, and interpret historically distant texts within the framework of the same social code [Hodge, Kress 1988:162-68]. Importantly, the greater the semantic disparity between the attribute and the noun “nationality” in these examples, the more complex the transformations, the more intense the ironic power of the allusion. Lauri Honko points to the importance of such linguistic phenomena as implications, allusion and ellipses for folkloristic research. They “fill” sentences with meaning via the context; it is impossible to read the meaning only from the wording of the sentences, because they act as signals carrying the transformal meaning to the addressee [Honko 1986a:41].

Returning to the self-perception of the Soviet Jews, it would be an exaggeration to say that their Jewishness was reduced merely to a stamp in their ID. Many spoke about some elements of the Jewish tradition that had been preserved in families despite all the obstacles. But the meaning of the tradition had undergone significant changes, often remaining obscure even to those who tried to observe it:

Arkadii T., 57, an engineer by training, works as a home attendant, while Iulia T., 50, an engineer by training, washes dishes in a hospital

Interviewer: Was your family interested in its Jewish roots?

Arkadii: Yes, yes, we ... we were forced to ... because beginning with our ID, from the “fifth paragraph” ... and very often “they wouldn’t hit your ID, but would hit you in the mug.”

Yulia: No, Arkadii, the question was, whether your family had observed any Jewish traditions.

Arkadii: I believe the Jewish traditions were observed in many intelligentsia families. We tried to observe such holidays as *Pesach*. We would try to get *matza*, tried to make a meal. Of course, we kept all these memories, and had some idea of what *Pesach* is all about. And the same was true about *Rosh Hashanah* in the fall. And, of course, we knew that festivals like *Purim* and *Hanukkah* exist. And we even enjoyed being different, particularly with our friends. We liked it because when we were students, we mostly mixed with Jewish kids. And those who knew at least something would even show off their knowledge of Jewish traditions and the Jewish way of life.

Arkadii’s misunderstanding of the interviewer’s question is not accidental. He habitually interprets everything Jewish in terms of nationality, rather than as culture and a distinctive way of life. Moreover, unwittingly, he reveals that he perceived his Jewishness as an act of coercion on the part of the state, and not as an internalized and consciously chosen identity. Arkadii mentions the notorious “fifth entry,” the fifth line on the Soviet identity card, which indicated the bearer’s nationality. Although it was to be found on all IDs, it came to connote Jewishness, and was used in such expressions as “he has the fifth entry,” “he didn’t get this job because of the fifth entry,” “he/she is an invalid of the fifth group/entry.” Martynova’s definition of non-Jews in Israel as “persons of a mistaken nationality,” which we quoted earlier, is a milder version of “invalids of the fifth entry,” and implies that their situation mirrors that of the Jews in the Soviet Union. The connotative

meaning of the “fifth entry” was ultimately fixed in the language after the anti-Semitic practices of the Soviet authorities were derided in a song by the prominent poet and cult figure of the 1960s and 1970s, Vladimir Vysotskii. The song is about two drunkards, a Russian and a Jew, who decide to immigrate to Israel. The Russian is granted permission to emigrate, while the Jew is not, because of the “fifth entry.”

Arkadii implies that Jews, including “halves,” were always ready to confront anti-Semitism. He alludes to the Soviet joke built on the antithesis of official documents and physical features; Russianness as expressed by the prototypical name Ivanov versus disguised Jewishness:

“Ivanov, don’t go to Lenin Street.”

“What’s up?”

“They beat Jews up there.”

“But what does it have to do with me? It says in my ID that I am Russian.”

“You don’t understand. They won’t hit your ID, they’ll hit your bloody mug.”

When Arkadii’s wife clarifies the interviewer’s question about his interest in his Jewish roots, he does not give a direct answer about his family, but prefers to generalize. It is not clear from his enumeration of the Jewish holidays whether he was familiar just with their names, or really knew their history and meaning. The only exception is Passover, which is consistent with what we heard from other subjects: even secular and assimilated Jews knew about that holiday, and tried to get or even make their own *matza*. Arkadii’s answer is another example of Russian speakers’ dislike of concrete facts and precise information that we mentioned earlier.

The other interesting motif in this extract is that Arkadii links the observance of tradition to social class. In claiming that it was the prerogative of the intelligentsia he turns tradition into an elitist practice. Moreover, even meager knowledge of it would elevate someone in the eyes of his or her peers. Judging from other interviews, Arkadii is wrong in his assumptions about the role of the intelligentsia in the preservation of Jewish tradition.

Our observations are confirmed by sociological data: there is an inverse relationship between the level of education and involvement in Jewish cultural life. The higher the level of education, the less intense is the involvement [Ryvkina 1996:54]. As is the case in many cultures, it was the older generation who will not let a persecuted culture die; moreover, very often it was barely literate old folk, who still remembered and tried to observe at least some elements of the tradition, although in a manner that deviated from mainstream Judaism. It was less important to observe the tradition correctly, than to refer to it in some way. That is why our informants’ interpretation of the concepts relating to tradition is loose, and allows for deviations which would be unacceptable for true observers as the next two excerpts illustrate:

Dana L., 23, from Rostov-on-Don, now living in Haifa, and studying at the university there

Dana: In principle, almost everybody in our family is Jewish. That is, both my parents are Jews with roots. It is very ... that is, I have known that I am Jewish since childhood.

Interviewer: Did you celebrate, did you celebrate any holidays? You observed some traditions; you have roots, haven't you? That's why I'm asking.

Dana: You know what? We didn't. But my mum intuitively separated... But here we began to observe ... Now we light candles ...

Interviewer: On the Sabbath?

Dana: Yes. And on *Yom Kippur* we try to ... We do try. For example, I've been observing the fast days since we arrived here. Well, my mum, she is not very well, but she tries to do whatever she can. We observe whatever we can.

Interviewer: Do you drive on the Sabbath?

Dana: We don't have a car, so we don't drive. That's how things are. But I do things. If I have something I need to do, I do it, schoolwork, for example. But in Russia, say, my mum intuitively separated meat and dairy products. She simply thought it wasn't hygienic, it was unpleasant. So she separated dishes, although she didn't know why. And (pause) we used to eat *matza*. And there was a funny incident. An acquaintance of ours, a Russian, invited my parents, he invited them over to his place to watch movies. He had a video. And it was considered really something! But he didn't know what *matza* was. He thought it was some sort of biscuit. So he put the treat on the table. And the treat was *matza* with lard. It really does taste good.

In answering the interviewer's questions, Dana is re-considering her family's way of life. In terms of Lotman's model of internal communication, Dana codes her experience anew, when she tries to classify her behavior in the framework of her new knowledge of Jewish tradition acquired in Israel. After some hesitation she admits that, in spite of trying to be traditional, the family still fails to behave consistently, and follows only those rules which do not interfere with their habits. An interesting detail is Dana's explanation of her mother's habit of separating dishes. In their house this was viewed as a hygienic norm, rather than a religious commandment. Dana's distorted understanding of the concept of Kashrut became clear in an informal conversation with the interviewer, two years after her interview.

Interviewer: What can I offer you? I can give you white cheese with sour cream, that's the only kosher dish I can make.

Dana: Oh, are you kosher?

Interviewer: I'm not, but I understand that you are.

Dana: Well, when I said that mum used separate dishes for meat and dairy foods, I didn't mean they had to be separated in the stomach as well.

[Cited from the authors' ethnographic diaries]

Confusion of this kind is quite common, and appears in several interviews. A case in point is Elvira A., a mountain Jew from Dagestan or Azerbaijan (see note 3), who defines her family as traditional. She told us that her grandmother had kept a kosher house. Yet she would make pork steaks for the children, because she believed it was important for growing youngsters. Significantly, on such occasions she sat them at a different table from the rest of the family.

The incident involving eating *matza* with lard mentioned by Dana was not unique to her family, as is clear from an interview, recorded in 1996, with Sergei S., 42, an electrician now living in the Haifa Bay area, who emigrated from Odessa in 1990:

My mother sometimes brought *matza* from the synagogue. As a rule it took a long time to eat it up, because my family is not religious. So I would take it when I was off hiking. It is very convenient to have on a trip: it's light, easy to pack, and an excellent substitute for bread. So I told my companions, those who didn't know what *matza* was ... I explained — it was fun for me, but I did it with an earnest expression on my face — I used to tell them that these were special biscuits for paratroopers. And they accepted my story at face value. It's a bit of a blasphemy, but a *matza* sandwich with properly salted thin slices of lard makes an excellent snack.

Both Dana and Sergei obviously enjoy their stories, although Sergei qualifies his behavior as blasphemy. Playing jokes amuses them for several reasons. First, they feel they possess secret knowledge, which gives them some sense of the superiority of the initiated. Second, although they are not afraid of the consequences of violating the rules of Kashrut, forbidden fruit is sweet. In addition, Sergei enjoys telling his non-Jewish friends tall stories and tricking them into eating Jewish food.

As we have tried to show, immigrants' personal narratives, a subgenre of modern folklore, demonstrate serious changes in meaning. This occurs as a result of double change which the text and the code undergo (see Lotman's terminology cited earlier). In personal narratives some of the concepts brought from the old country and acquired in the new may have connotations greatly deviating from the denotational meaning.

The process of immigration always involves intercultural contacts, and consequently the differing assumptions of specific cultural groups are always being challenged in the process of communication. Knowledge of each other's past, habits and customs, particularly if such knowledge has been acquired in childhood and adolescence, can be an asset for society as a whole, since it will contribute to more effective negotiation of social meanings, and, hopefully, more effective intercultural communication.

The qualitative analysis of personal narratives provide folklorists and anthropologists with rich data about the culture-related meanings shared by studied groups. They can also influence relations between folkloristics and social studies. While so far folkloristics has benefited from sociological methodology, social studies seldom use the results of folklore research. The situation is gradually changing, and the attention that social scientist pay to jokes may be the first sign of this change. Interdisciplinary interaction should, however, move from the application of folkloric data in preparing questionnaires to consultations in which folklorists could assist social workers, psychologists and other professionals responsible for immigrants' integration.

## NOTES

1 Twenty of the interviews were conducted by students from the University of Haifa: Hanna Shmulian,

Svetlana Berenshtein, Alina Sanina, Marina El-Kayam and Laura Abramov. They then placed these at our disposal. The rest of the interviews were conducted by the authors.

- 2 We have translated excerpts from the interviews without editing in order to preserve the specific features of oral narration and the individual style of each storyteller. We have also preserved instances of code switching. Hebrew insertions in the excerpts are italicized. Some of the interviewees were apprehensive about disclosing their identity. We have respected their views and changed all the names. The informants' age, professions, place of origin and occupation remain unaltered.
- 3 The speech of other informants also abounds in hyperbole. For example, describing the exodus of Soviet Jews in the 1990s, Inna Kh. says, "... everyone took off, just everyone who wasn't lazy ...". This phraseological unit is used to emphasize the multitude of participants in an event or activity. While talking about the loss of social status among immigrants she amplifies the phenomenon by calling them "25th-rate people." Referring to a repair job she and her husband attempted to complete on their own, Anastasia N. evaluates this modest ambition as "impudence and despair." Recounting her son's conflict with the Soviet customs, Gaiane A. refers to the episode as "tragic circumstances" and so on. In most cases informants hyperbolize negativity, be it unpleasant states and feelings, unfavorable impressions or failures.

All the researchers quoted allude to Soviet-Jewish jokes. Brym, for example reminds his readers that a well-known Russian quip defines a Jewish wife as a means of transportation. In a slightly different form the same joke appears in Ryvkina: Jewishness is not a luxury but a means of conveyance. She also quotes another joke: A man applies for a job. He is asked, "What's your nationality?" He answers, "Well, you got it right..." Gitelman alludes to Soviet Jews as "invalids of the fifth category" and so on.

Eclecticism in religious beliefs is characteristic of Jews and non-Jews alike. We would like to cite two further examples from interviews with younger informants, both from Muslim republics of the FSU. One of them, a Mountain Jew (also called Tats, living in Dagestan or Azerbaijan and speaking Judea-Tat, a dialect of Judea Persian (Farsi) [Wigoder 1989: 385]), Rasul O., 24 from Makhachkala in Dagestan, claimed that "strange as it may sound, the elementary customs of the Torah, of the Jewish Bible have been transferred to the laws of the Shariah. That's why the people of Dagestan, their laws are a combination of the laws of the mountain people (the Jews) and the Shariah, i.e. Islam." Another subject, Ekaterina R., 24, from Tashkent, considers herself Christian. Her mother is Russian and Orthodox Christian, her father Jewish. In Tashkent the family was well-integrated into the Muslim and local Uzbek cultures. Ekaterina remembers that both of her grandmothers "purified" the house, one with Jewish prayers, the other with Christian ones. Ekaterina is seeking an integral religion, and she told us about her encounter with a member of a sect claiming a symbiosis of the great religions: "Three religions are combined in this movement. The sign of this religion, and this is what she showed me, is *Magen David* (Hebrew for the "Star of David") Inside it is a cross and below is a crescent. Have you heard about it? And a person (a follower of the movement), according to what she told me, should be a Muslim by education, while the basis of law is the Torah, and the road of faith is Christian experience."

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## De-Toxing the Nation. Icon Worship – A Sobering Experience?

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In June 2001 the Russian tabloid newspaper, Megapolis-Express, reported that the country's famous magician, Iurii Longo, had performed a new "miracle:" he had turned a glass of water into vodka. "Why?!?," exclaims the magician, when asked what gave him the idea. "Very rarely do I meet people - and believe me, I travel a lot - who fail to ask me when magic is finally going to reveal the secret of turning water into vodka" [Megapolis-express 2001]. Longo is still in the process of perfecting his skills; meantime, people are eagerly awaiting the day.

For centuries alcohol has been as much part of Russian cultural history and folklore as icon worship, miracles, and sorcery. An entertaining connection to Longo's task for the future can be found in the past, when in pre-Revolutionary Russia "sorcerers were commonly paid in wine or vodka" [Ivanits 1992:118]. In the light of this and factors such as the traditional association between traditional festivals and alcohol consumption, the Orthodox Church was firm in its condemnation of the sin of drunkenness, and to this day defines alcohol as the devil's brew. The aim of this paper is to examine the processes of continuity and change in Russian culture (revival and survival) with reference to one of the ways in which alcoholism is purportedly overcome in Russia today, namely by veneration of a particular icon, which, it is claimed, since 1878 has been helping many Russians to rid themselves of the evil that possesses them. I shall not dwell on statistics, nor discuss the problem of alcoholism as such. Suffice to say that, according to a Reuters' news report in May 2001, two thirds of Russian men die from alcohol abuse. A three-year study conducted in Moscow and Udmurtiia revealed that heart disease, accidents and suicides account for nearly 75% of all male deaths, most of them alcohol induced. "Men are seldom sober when they die" [<http://abcnews.go.com/sections/world/DailyNews/russia000519.html>].(1)

Yet drink as a central part of the male cultural environment in Russia is not a recent phenomenon. Throughout history, the Russian male identity, cultural and national, has been linked to alcohol consumption. Drinking seems always to have comprised an essential part of men's culture, and often acts as an assertion of their identity. Thus, the heroes (*bogatyry*) of the folk epic *byliny* embody men with a prodigious capacity for alcohol. Alcohol has also always occupied a central role in male bonding ceremonies; it has afforded men the necessary moral and physical boost in warfare and is invariably part of the consolidation process of patron-client relationships, as a rule a very male environment.(2)

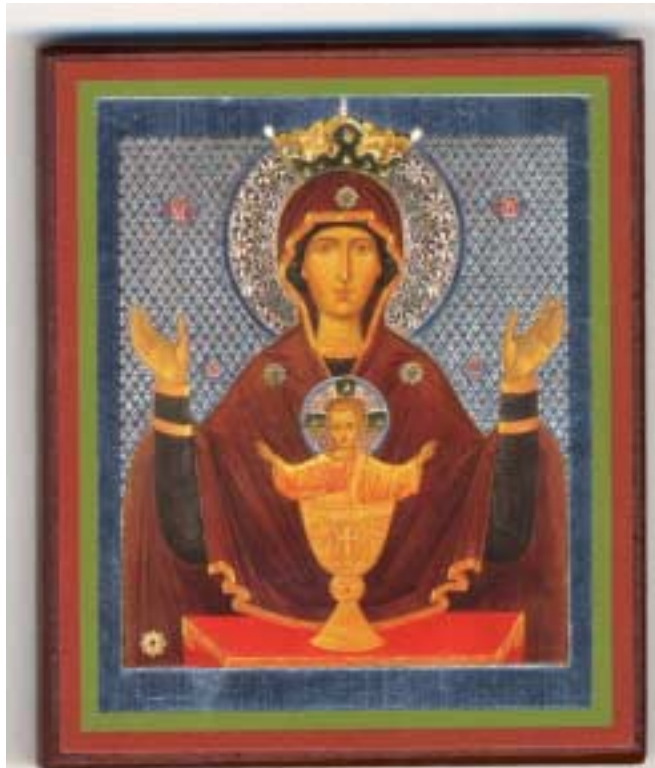
It was not untypical in Russia for favors to be performed and help offered quickly, if alcohol was offered as a reward. Thus Dostoevskii recounts in his Diary of a Writer (*Dnevnik pisatel'ia*) the story of a fire wreaking havoc in a village. As the flames threatened to destroy the church, the villagers hurried to its rescue. However, their attention was soon directed away from the house of God to the local inn: the innkeeper had appeared on the scene to plead with the volunteers that, if they saved his pot-house instead of the church, "he

would give them a barrel of liquor. The church burned down, but the pot-house was saved” [Dostoevskii 1873-81:187]. There are numerous tales and fabulates based round vodka: for example, recounting how the devil was the first to set up a distillery, how he taught the peasant to make spirits and how as a result of demonic assistance, the peasant opened a tavern and got rich [Ivanits 1992:42]. Thus, Dostoevskii’s *Diary* entry, in effect, describes a double-victory for the devil: the church burnt down after being ignored in favour of the pot-house, or rather the liquid he allegedly invented, which provided the *raison d’être* for the establishment of taverns in the first place. The consumption of alcohol, however, by no means excluded the priesthood. Male members of the peasant *mir* regarded the invitation of the village priest as central, especially on the occasion of major holy days, particularly Easter. The priest was to make the rounds and join every villager for food and, more importantly, drink (by definition alcoholic). A peasant would take mortal offence if a cleric rejected his hospitality. Rejection was rare, however, as invariably the priest’s livelihood would depend on his participation in such rituals. That said, the poverty-stricken village priest as, for example, described by Donald W. Treadgold, was often “notorious for drunkenness and loose living” in any case [Treadgold 1968:100-01].

During the Soviet period, at least in the city, alcohol consumption especially abuse of and addiction to alcohol, joined criminality, prostitution and suicide as one of four behavioral patterns regarded as deviant. Yet while alcoholism was perceived as a negative characteristic of general human values, alcohol commonly played, and continues to play, a part in the rites and rituals of everyday life, whether secular (e.g. birthdays, a new job or remembrance days) or religious (e.g. communion or the end of a fast). Up until the 1980s, Soviet historians regularly attributed the above-mentioned “anomalies” to the survival of capitalism in people’s consciousness [Lebina 1999:19-20]. Equally, it could be argued that in post-Soviet Russia, too, capitalism might be blamed for the continuing existence of criminality, prostitution, alcoholism and suicide. In the case of the first three they are mainly forms of survival, in the case of the latter often an act of desperation at the inability to find a way in which to survive. Yet alcohol has also always been a marker of (Russian) national identity, and the Soviet authorities had also to contend with a deep rooted cultural attachment to drink, reflected in sources as early as the Tale of Bygone Years (*Povest’ vremennykh let*), s. a. 986, a written account of an oral legend, telling how Vladimir I rejected the Muslim religion because it would not allow the Rus’ to drink: “drinking is the joy of the Russes. We cannot exist without that pleasure” [Cross, Sherbowitz-Westor 1973:97].(3)

The veneration of the icon in question here, the “Mother of God the Never-Draining Cup,” commenced in 1878, when a peasant and retired soldier of the Tula region, who had fallen victim to the bottle, was drinking himself into poverty (losing his entire pension to the devilish liquid) and physical ruin (his legs had become paralysed). One night he dreamt of a monk, who told him to go to the monastery of Our Lady in Serpukhov, for there was the icon of the “Mother of God the Never-Draining Cup” (*Неупиваемая чаша*). It was before this icon that the monk asked him to pray in order to regain his physical and mental health. The retired soldier, however, preferred to carry on drinking than crawl all the way to venerate the icon. In classic folk narrative manner, the dream repeated itself a second and third time, until the monk, now issuing stern commands, put the fear of God into him sufficiently for him to decide to make his way to the monastery, though he had to travel on

all fours. As he approached his destination he began to feel better, and even managed to walk the last part of his journey, supported by a walking stick. Upon arrival at the monastery, he told the monks of his visions and asked to see the icon of the “Never-Draining Cup.” No one had heard of such an icon, until someone wondered whether it was not the image hanging in the stairwell between the church and the vestry. And, indeed, that is where the icon was found. It was taken into the church, prayers were said and the retired soldier healed. Word spread fast, so that soon people from all over Russia were making their way to the miracle-working icon to pray, be it for themselves, their fathers, husbands or sons.(4)



*The icon of the Mother of God the Never-Draining Cup*

During the Soviet period the monastery was closed and the church housing the miracle-working icon demolished. Only one church in the whole province remained open. It was to this place that the “Never-Draining Cup” was moved, but pilgrims were few and far between until the 1980s, when their number began to rise steadily. The monastery in Serpukhov was re-opened in 1990, and ever since has been inundated with streams of people, eager to express their desperation before the Mother of mothers, in the hope of intercession and a miraculous cure.

It is of interest that a large percentage of miracle-working icons in Russia are images of the Mother of God. Indeed, Fedotov, in his description and analysis of the *dukhovnye stikhi* (spiritual verses), asserts that “all of humanity’s anguish, all tenderness before divinity, which people dare not express before

Christ for fear of God, they will pour out freely and lovingly to the Mother of God” [Fedotov 1991:49].(5) One may thus choose to argue the case of the psychoanalyst, who would relay to us the concept of the “inner mother,” a residue of early mother-child interaction, which according to one commentator exists “within the normal adult psyche of the Orthodox venerator of the Mother of God” [Rancour-Lafferriere 2001:11]. The helpless and despairing child turns to the mother, in this case the Mother of God, asking for assistance and willingly letting him or herself be helped. Whatever the reason, religious legends, popular miracle accounts and, in particular, the hugely popular Dream of the Mother of God (*Son Bogoroditsy*) and Pilgrimage of the Mother of God among the Torments (*Khozhdenie Borogroditsy po mukam*) all testify to her importance as caring intercessor for those in need.

Vera Shevzov notes that veneration of miracle-working icons has often “crossed both gender and socio-economic lines” [Shevzov 1999:27]. What we see here, however, especially in terms of gender, is that worship

is perhaps better described as gender focussed than crossing the line. Thus, although the person through whom the icon in question was “discovered” was a man, it is safe to say that a large number of those making their journey to the monastery in Serpukhov are women. While the accompanying video, produced by the Russian Orthodox Church, depicts street life in Russia in which the “alcoholics” shown are all men, the majority of worshippers at the monastery’s church are women: women, who pray for their sons, brothers, husbands and fathers. This also finds confirmation in Church-published literature on the matter, which shows that the majority of the stories of salvation (often of husbands and sons) are told by women. Furthermore, some writing is even explicitly aimed at women attempting to save their loved ones. A leaflet about alcoholism obtained at the monastery reads: “What are we to do if the alcoholic won’t pray? In this case it is necessary for others to pray for him: his mother, wife or children” [“O P’ianstve” 2000]. Equally, a booklet entitled How to Help Those Suffering from Alcoholism and Drug Addiction is subtitled Spiritual Advice and Prayers for Mothers, Wives and Children.

Accounts of people being cured of the evils of alcoholism through prayer before the “Never-Draining Cup” are widely available, be they in the form of little booklets, video or CD ROM, all on sale at the monastery, as well as at the numerous church stalls on Russia’s streets and in churches. Talking about “revelatory” experiences has always been important in the history of the Orthodox Church and its icons, and consequently, therefore, among its flock. Miracles were never regarded as private affairs, but as something of direct relevance to believers generally. However, while in the past it was believed that the “concealment of something sacred lays a mortal sin on the soul” [Shevzov 1999:30], I suspect that today’s appeal by the priests to people to recount their stories may also have something to do with providing the Church with useful material for advertising its services. Naturally, the Church is interested in saving as many souls as possible. But at a time when the Russian Orthodox Church is still rebuilding itself and has many competitors, whether other confessions, sects or mere faith-healers, hope and help that can be provided through the testimony of ordinary believers about miracle-working icons can offer valuable assistance in the struggle for souls.

That said, miracle-working icons are deeply rooted in both official and popular Orthodoxy, Orthodox theological, liturgical and devotional heritage. And, as in the past, people today are being woven into the narrative that makes an icon special. Their individual sins, in this case alcoholism, bring them together. Thus what the icon might “do” for the individual could somehow be linked to the fate of the Russian people as a whole. The nation becomes an imagined community, alcoholism the common denominator: individual tragedies suffered by many. And while the rituals of daily life see many united by, for want of a better word, the “common enemy” (the demon drink) the miracle-working icon sees them united in the face of it (the Mother of God). Small copies of the icon, as we are told by one of the monks on the video about the monastery and its miracle-working icon, have become features in most households, since almost every family contains at least one member who drinks [Neupivaemaia chasha 1998].

As already mentioned above, large numbers of Russians are killed or their health and lives seriously harmed by what is, paradoxically, the nation’s favourite pastime. Indeed, alcoholism has become a major

contributor to the country's demographic crisis [Moscow Times, 01/22/2001:8].(10) Eternal torment in the afterlife, something that has permeated popular Orthodoxy, past and present, and is reflected both in folk religious legends (*legendy*),(11) as well as the literature disseminated by the Church today, does not appear, however, to act as a deterrent, let alone help root out the problem.

What we observe in contemporary Russia is that, while alcoholism is widespread and the admission of "being Orthodox" an even commoner feature of life, churches are still largely empty. How then can we explain the long queues in front of miracle-working icons and shrines? As already mentioned, life after Communism brought with itself many uncertainties and lack of guidance. This, coupled with the revival of old traditions such as the veneration of miracle-working icons, explains well enough the increasingly large numbers of pilgrims and miracle-seekers. One gets the sense that the majority of those in the queues, however, have little knowledge of Orthodox theology and liturgy, and give the impression of an occult-consuming mass, awaiting miracles as if by magic [see also Liubomudrov 2000:45]. In this they are conforming to the popular tradition of folk healing via magic charms (*zagovory*), which in many instances were given a prayer-like format and also appealed to the Mother of God (see below). What the Church might like to see, namely the conversion or return to Orthodoxy of the Russian people, uniting them into a body of the faithful, can so far be observed only on a very superficial level. Often the veneration of an icon or shrine takes on the characteristics of a mass cult: people flocking to church in the hope of a miracle, and not, as would be expected of Orthodox Christians, for a blessing and the forgiveness of sins. Indeed, this mass appeal of miracles is not only rooted in Russia's traditions but has been described to me as "Orthodox magic" (*pravoslavnyi magizm*), denoting the way in which contemporary Orthodoxy is approached and "consumed" by the majority of Russians today.(8)

The church at the monastery, housing the image of the "Never-Draining Cup," is busy all year round, especially on Sundays, and almost inaccessible thanks to the many hundreds, if not thousands, of pilgrims on 18th May, the icon's feast-day. Many of those healed, having received hope and the possibility of a new start, in gratitude leave behind pieces of jewellery, some of which are displayed in front of the icon.(9) Father Kirill, the superior at the monastery, told me that they have already received so much jewellery that "you wouldn't be able to see the icon if we hung it all in front of it. We could fill whole corridors with all those golden gifts." He refrained, however, from commenting on what happens to the trinkets, if they are not gracing the icon, nor, indeed, the monastery's corridors. Here, as at so many other moments in contemporary Orthodox practice, we are witnessing a new and evolving popular religious tradition. The pragmatism that underlines past and present popular Orthodoxy is strongly linked to the survival of traditional rituals and the customary belief in miracles (and more specifically, the solution to problems resulting from them). The more theoretical, canonical aspects of Orthodoxy do not attract many ordinary people in Russia today [cf. Fedotov 1991:92].

An altogether different mass-cultural aspect of miracles is that they make for very attractive features in newspapers. It should be no surprise that the tabloids are quick to report on "intriguing" miraculous events. Thus the "Never-Draining Cup" found its way into the papers in March 2001, for example, when we read in the newspaper Chas Pik (Rush Hour) that an alcoholic prayed before a copy of the icon (at home) and coughed up a

little devil (mixed in with his usual portion of phlegm). The creature measured about two centimetres, and resembled a slimy grey worm with two small horns attached to a minuscule head. Events unfurled as follows: the alcoholic's wife put the creature into a bottle containing home-made wine (!), and then his mother, who had brought back a copy of the icon of the "Never-Draining Cup" from her previous visit to Serpukhov, decided to take the creature in the bottle to the monks. The bottle remained at the monastery, as a result of which many of the monks fell ill and became depressed. Time passed, and the alcohol evaporated. And so, after a while, now that the wine in the bottle had vanished, the monks decided to pour vodka into it (no reason for this is given in the article), but the smell from the bottle was so gross that they opted for a scientific approach. The scientist consulted, however, had never come across anything like it, while those within the Department of Military Mutation claimed that the worm was just a simple parasite. Not satisfied with this statement, the scientist they had approached initially decided to take on the case himself, but fell ill and died. His colleague, continuing his work after his untimely demise, also fell ill. The monks agreed to take back the bottle and burn the devilish creature. The drunk has not touched alcohol since, and has become a very pious man ["P'ianitsa pomolilsia" 2001].(10) The old Russian proverb "to drink wine is to put oneself in the hands of the devil" (*vina napit'sia – besu predat'sia*) [Vlasova 1998:41] serves as a poignant accompaniment to the story, for not only would it prove its point literally, but it would equally support the Church's argument that alcohol is a "devilish liquid."

Three things are noteworthy: the structure of the narrative, for one, suggests an oral legend (*legenda*), recorded by the journalist. It ought to be borne in mind, however, that the article was published in a secular tabloid typical of post-Soviet Russia. Yet the fact that such papers report instances of this kind at all appears to reflect not merely the obvious sensationalist stance that papers of this kind adopt on the supernatural, but also the conviction that such stories will appeal to the readership because of their miraculous subject and "unbelievable" outcome. Besides, the contents refer to the longstanding Russian Orthodox preoccupation, at both official and popular level, with the devil and with exorcism [Ivanits 1989:38-50, 84 ff.]. Slightly incongruous, however, is the "scientific approach" taken by the monks, undone only by their decision in the end to take the bottled creature back to the monastery and burn it. Second, and convenient for the Church, is the implication of the clear inadequacy of modern science to deal with the supernatural, which, it is suggested, obviously exists, but no laboratory is able to solve the puzzle behind it. The third aspect of the story worth mentioning refers back to the gender focus; the alcoholic here has three female characters at hand to help: the Mother of God, his wife and his mother.

The concluding sentence of the leader in Moskovskii Komsomolets of 18 June 2001 on alcoholism in Serpukhov and the icon of the "Never-Draining Cup" appears to underline the mass or everyday, rather than the religious, aspect of the veneration of the icon. Here we read, that "just as in his time the smith Vakula went to the Empress to ask for a pair of boots for his Oksana, today people from all over Great Russia are drawn to the miracle-working icon ["Sviatykh – zanosil!" 2001]. It is curious to see the cure of a debilitating disease (if alcoholism, at least by those affected by it, is in any way recognised as such) set on a par with the magic receipt of a pair of boots, as described in Gogol's story "Christmas Eve" (*Noch' pered Rozhdestvom*). What this

sentence underlines, however, is the general perception that people flock to the icon in order to receive something (healing), for a miracle. Gogol's story is frankly about magic, while miracle-working icons, at least in the eyes of the Church, are not. Yet, for the majority of those who flock to venerate the icon, the magic aspect so characteristic of popular Orthodoxy prevails. Besides, this article was published in the second most popular Russian daily (tabloid), and thus will have reached a wide readership. Vakula's gift to Oksana will not only be known to many of its members, but in addition to equating religious miracles with magic, creates an air of familiarity, which perhaps facilitates identification with and understanding of the miraculous at work here. It is to be assumed that the report is written in all seriousness. Far be it from me to believe that the author wrote this with tongue in cheek. If they did, however, it is still likely that a reasonably large number of readers would not have noticed, while those who were sceptical would laugh at the story in any case.(11)

Not only the subject of newspaper articles, the icon itself is also used in the advertisements of faith-healers proclaiming to rid people of the evils of alcoholism. Those offering their services, invariably women going by the title of "Orthodox healer" or "Orthodox woman" (*pravoslavnaia istselitel'nitsa/ baba*), are usually depicted next to the text listing their abilities and boasting about their rate of success, dressed in Orthodox fashion, a head-scarf covering their head, and holding candle and cross, while the icon of the Never-Draining Cup stands on a table in front of them. They thus uphold a long-standing custom of their trade, for historically magic healers in Russia would, "along with herbs and grasses [make] use of the cross, holy water, incense, and church candles" [Ivanits 1992:114]. The accompanying charm was called "prayer," and quite frequently was directed at the Mother of God [Ivanits 1992:115]. While alcoholics are reported to have been "cured" by people ordering prayers on their behalf at the monastery, the tradition of healing by magic, if advertising is anything to go by, continues to this day; and the advancement of technology has allowed contemporary faith-healers to offer healing without the subject being present by magical prayers performed over their photographs. Needless to say, the Church disapproves of these "magicians, psychics, psychotherapists or faith-healers (many of whom are charlatans)," who in fact are servants of the devil. This "being possessed by evil devilish spirit," just like mere medical (i.e. physical) treatment of alcoholism, according to the Church, means that the sufferer remains a slave to his addiction, his soul far from free and his spirit far from pure. Such spiritual purity and independence can only be achieved through a belief in God and a life with Him [*Akafist* 2000:20].

Can it then be argued that the Church is de-toxing the nation with the support of the miracle-working icon? The popularity of the veneration of the icon of the Mother of God the Never-Draining Cup and the widespread belief in, and accounts of the icon's healing powers reflects a tradition revived, continued and evolving. Official and popular Orthodoxy meet here and provide the context within which two key moments in contemporary Russia are played out: the struggle with, and desperate search for a solution to the problem of alcoholism and the problem of reviving the country's traditional religion. Orthodoxy is struggling in a competitive role in the post-Soviet spiritual marketplace, symbolized by the cult revolving around the icon. The few statistics mentioned above testify to the seriousness of Russia's drink problem. This goes hand in hand with the central role alcohol consumption has played in Russia's history, a habit that, like the seemingly magic



subtext of icon-worship, appears embedded in the Russians' sense of identity and understanding of their culture. It appears that the solution to the problem of alcoholism is not just purveyed by the Church, but also by its so-called "heretic rivals," such as faith healers, equally part of Russian tradition. While the Church agrees that the medical profession has some stake in the matter, they nonetheless believe that alcoholism is a spiritual illness, and curing your body but not your soul will have you falling for the bottle over and over again [Neupivaemaia chasha 1998].

For some icon worship has undoubtedly been a sobering experience. However, to conquer the problem of alcoholism on a national scale with the help of the Never-Draining Cup, must surely be wishful thinking. The Church may deem the Never-Draining Cup a tool for curing the nation, yet the World Health Organization regards alcoholism as a national disease, one in need of medical attention from the point of view of the medical profession.

Alcoholism and icon-worship are not merely intrinsic parts of Russian culture, but, in present-day Russia, a society whose life is dominated by uncertainty and lack of guidance, both are inevitable signs of the times. And both, in their own ways, may thus be interpreted as comfort-inducing mechanisms to help cope with the hardship of everyday life. While drinking may not be followed by a sobering experience, icon worship, if not sobering, is at least a traditional comforting experience, a means of taking control of one's life by way of handing it over into the hands of God, or at least those of His Mother.

#### NOTES

- 1 This report, incidentally, was lifted straight onto the angelfire web-page, where it was presented as evangelising Christians out to rescue the Russian people from their spiritual decline [[www.angelfire.com/oh2/raicc/](http://www.angelfire.com/oh2/raicc/)].
- 2 A fitting, and perhaps somewhat ironic, example here is the Head of Sofrino, Russia's most prolific producer of religious artefacts and churchware, who, I was told, has his own brand of vodka: the bottles are labelled with his portrait, to be seen and devoured only by his most esteemed clients.
- 3 This also underlines the post-Soviet equation of "being Orthodox" with "being Russian," in which drink is a historic feature of national character and reason for choosing Orthodoxy over Islam on the grounds of the latter's prohibition against drinking: "liking a drink is part of being Russian, which in turn is part of being Orthodox."
- 4 This is the story as it is related in all the pamphlets about the icon, as well as on the accompanying video [Neupivaemaia chasha 1998] and CD ROM [Vysotskii obitel' 2000].
- 5 Translation my own.
- 6 An editorial article. According to another article in the February/March issue of Novaia Gazeta in 2001, during the mid-nineties Russia lost up to 43,000 of its citizens to fake vodka. It asks by how much this number would have to be multiplied in order to reach the real total of alcohol-related

- deaths. By the end of the nineties, when “honest” alcohol production had climbed its way up to 54.6% of the market, the number of those dying of drink had declined, only to rise again. Consequently, in 2001, for example, it eliminated a number equivalent to the inhabitants of an average town.
- 7 As, for example, in the well-known folk legend about the drunkard condemned to act as the devil’s dray-horse in Hell.
- 8 Interview with Fr. Georgii (Chistiakov), Moscow, 2001.
- 9 My guess, though I have not been able to confirm this, is that most of the jewellery comprises gifts given by grateful women, i.e. those thankful that their prayers have been heard.
- 10 Less sensational, yet somewhat similar in content, is the account of one woman on the video [Neupivaemaia chasha 1998]. Not only are we told about her success in overcoming her drinking problem, but are also enlightened about the way in which she came to give up smoking. One day she went to church ... Her happiness about her newly found trust in God made her want to sing along with the choir. But all she managed to produce was a very coarse sound, before she began to cough. And out she spat a little black worm, the creature evidently representing the last remaining devil residing within her, the one that had tempted her to smoke. She has not touched a cigarette since.
- 11 This newspaper is, however, less likely to be read by well-educated sections of the population.

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## Betwixt and Between: The Cult of Living Saints in Contemporary Bulgaria (1)

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(with photos by Petko Ivanov)

The exemplary persona of Christianity known as the saint is a junction of antinomies: “hereness” and “thereness”, immanence and transcendence, familiarity and incomprehensibility. In social terms, however, the saint is above all the figure of a religious virtuoso emerging at the interface of official and popular religion.(2) Various hagiolatric communities, from loosely defined local groups to well organized religious societies and sects, constantly cultivate their religious specialists who are often dubbed “saints” and treated as saints while still alive. Such holy persons, aspiring for saintly status in their lifetime who have not been canonized by the official Church, are usually designated in the scholarly tradition as ‘folk,’ ‘near-,’ ‘would-be,’ ‘living’ [see, e.g., Macklin and Margolies 1988], or in general not-quite-saints, to differentiate them from their canonized, “otherworldly” colleagues.

The majority of cases of modern folk saints (19th-20<sup>th</sup> c.) within Bulgarian hagiolatric communities are healers and clairvoyants sometimes called “living saints,” who only rarely enjoy popularity beyond the narrow scope of their initial local cults. Against this background of ephemeral and amorphous saints a few cases stand out as epitomizing the general tendencies of popular religious saint-making in Bulgaria: the miracle-maker of Silistra Angelush Trifonov (1827-after 1904), the Holy Virgin Korteza Khadzhiiska from Sliven (c.1873-after 1920), the prophet Bona Velinova from Grigorevo (1885-1960), the Venerable Stoina Dimitrova from the district of Melnik (1883-1933), and the most celebrated near-saint of present-day Bulgaria, the oracle from the town of Petrich Vanga Dimitrova (1911-1996). This study is based primarily on ethnographic data about them, (3) as well as on wide-ranging narrative material reflecting Bulgarian folk cosmological concepts.

Saints are analyzed here as cosmological agents of the communities that worship them and their status is compared and contrasted with the communal status of other cosmological figures, such as vampires or witches. Our approach is centered on the folk term “living saint” in an attempt to outline a structural profile of the saintly figure in Bulgarian popular religion from the viewpoint of the ethnography of speaking, that is, the study of speech episodes in their social context. The paper is built upon our trust in the capacity of folk terminology to manifest an insider’s understanding of folk phenomena. Its first, descriptive part, presents a case-study of the unofficial cult of the Venerable Stoina, as seen through the term “living saint” used in the cult. The second, analytical, part is an attempt to reconstruct the Bulgarian folk concept of living holiness that underlies the ostensibly divergent and often contradictory discourses about different living saints.

## I. THE SAINTLY CAREER OF A VILLAGE CLAIRVOYANT

*Zhiv svetets*, the exact Bulgarian equivalent of “living saint,” has two equally paradoxical usages in folk discourse. It is used not only for live local healers and clairvoyants but also for canonized saints with well-established Christian and folk cults. The term apparently encompasses two different metaphors with inverted tenors and vehicles: living saint vs. living saint. In the first metaphor the title “saint” which implies dead, or “very special dead” [Brown 1981: 69-85] is applied to living people; in the latter the presumably dead saint is presented as alive.(4)

When using the term *zhiv svetets*, however, the members of the folk communities we study do not differentiate between these two hidden metaphorical predications. Moreover, they do not seem to separate the two usages of the term. One can only assume that behind the confusing variety of folk locutions there exists an implicit yet uniform concept of living holiness. This concept is not immediately obvious to the outsider because folk communities tend to define their own terms through stories rather than through propositions. They do not conceive of a living saint as the sum total of his/her distinctive features but as a set of events. This is why the only way to reveal the implicit folk concept of living holiness is by analyzing the concrete events around a living saint as they are articulated in folk parlance.

The case of the Venerable Stoina of Sushitsa is particularly suitable for such a venture. Both before and after her death she has been venerated as a living saint by various folk communities in South-Western Bulgaria; she is believed to be a close associate of other “living saints” like St. George. The rich data that has been collected provides an abundance of locutions and narratives that comment on the concept of living holiness in its original folk context.(5)

### From Divine Election to Social Selection

Stoina Dimitrova was born on September 9, 1883 in the hamlet of Haznatar, Sérrai region (since 1913 part of Greece, where it is called Chrisohorapha). According to the legend, her birth was marked by a sign from God: a pigeon landed on her cradle signifying the beginning of an exceptional life. When she was seven, Stoina lost her sight. She contracted smallpox, and at the critical moment when her parents thought she was dying a terrible storm broke out. The door opened and the house was lit by an unbearable light. The child told her parents not to be afraid: St. George had come to visit her. That day she became permanently blind, but thanks to a gift from Heaven to the saint she was granted a different spiritual sight.(6)



*Vanga Dimitrova, Stoina's successor, receiving her call in a whirlwind (see note 17). [An icon from "St. Petka's" Church in Rupite, Petrich District.]*

When she turned sixteen she performed her first miracle: St. George appeared once again and told her to dig in the yard of her parents' house, where she discovered an icon of the saint with an icon-lamp. The village built a small chapel at the place of the discovery and Stoina started living there.

In 1913 (during the Balkan Wars) her relatives, like many other Bulgarian families from the region, migrated northwards, to the inner territories of the country.(7) Along the way Stoina parted with them forever and headed alone to the church of St. George in Sushitsa, following, as she explained, her call "to serve the saint." The church of Sushitsa is situated outside the village, in an isolated hilly place right next to the village cemetery. Stoina chose this space inhabited by saints and the dead, living there to the end of her days. At her request a small room was built for her in the upper level of the church, in the woman's section. Since there was no precedent in Bulgaria for people to live inside a church, this act of Stoina's alone marked her out as exceptional, not only in her own community, but in the tradition as a whole.

Everything in the daily routine of this extraordinary hermit woman was also unusual. She ate only communion bread and dressed like a nun only in black, although she never took the veil. Peasants from Sushitsa led her around the district to preach, and people came to her to confess their sins, as if she were a priest and not an illiterate woman. Above all, however, she was distinguished by her "gift from God," allowing her to see things beyond the range of normal. She recognized people "from their breathing," called total strangers by their names, knew without explanation why somebody was visiting her. People came to learn secrets from the past and events of the future, to get advice on communal or personal problems, or to satisfy their curiosity about the end of this world and life in the next.



*The "living" St. George guarding the entrance to Sushitsa's Church*

Stoina had all this "very special" knowledge because she was in constant contact with the transcendent; so people in Sushitsa still believe. Witnesses claim that she often talked with the saints who came to visit her. Especially important were her contacts with St. George. In the district they say she is the sister of St. George, thus interpreting Stoina's relation to the saints exclusively in kinship terms. Stoina not only communicated with the saints but also acted together with them, on numerous occasions miraculously saving "her village" from Turkish attack with the help of St. George. Many stories tell how she punished blasphemers, thieves and murderers with miracles of retribution, and this portrays her again as a protector of the community and its values.

The most celebrated gift Stoina possessed, her healing skill, was also attributed to her contacts with the saints. When sick people came to see her, she would talk to the icons and say what instructions she had been given by the saints. She practiced exclusively faith-healing, occasionally with the addition of herbal medicine and other folk

medicine methods. Her most frequent prescriptions were for the ill person to take Holy Communion in several (usually seven) particular churches, to sleep overnight in a church or a monastery, or simply to pray.

Protector, healer and clairvoyant, Stoina was respected as a holy person throughout the region around Sushitsa, and the system of patron-client relationship involving her spread. Knowledge about her extraordinary powers and abilities traveled around the country, although she never became the object of institutional propaganda and her worship was supported by purely folk mechanisms. Her vita relates that she was visited by many prominent people with different social backgrounds, including some political figures, “all of them coming to her in the firm belief that she was a living saint.”

#### Recurrent Near-Death Experiences

The most unusual events in Stoina’s life were her near-death experiences, that is recurrent experience of periods of clinical death. The narratives about these events closely follow the rich Bulgarian tradition of near-death folklore, which interprets apparent death as a journey to the Other World.(8) This tradition sees the dead-alive person as split into a subject traveling among the dead, and an apparently dead body remaining among the living. In accordance with this dichotomy near-death narratives are divided into, firstly, reports about an otherworldly experience by these visionary (*Ich-Erzählungen* or retellings), and, secondly, testimony about the concomitant events in this world.

Afterlife reports confirm the stereotypical folk vision of the Other World as a village where the dead live in families and neighborhoods, where the topography sometimes reminds the sojourner of the cemetery in his native village.(9) The righteous eat and drink what was brought to their graves during memorial services, while sinners sit hungry to one side. This segregation is often further elaborated in terms of the Christian distinction between Heaven and Hell. The folk texts recounting Stoina’s impressions of the Other World do not deviate from this standard vision. In fact, they so closely match other folk narratives that it must remain unclear whether Stoina really related them, or they were ascribed to her as a consequence of cultural inertia.

The testimonies about events surrounding Stoina’s near-death experiences center round a circumstance which preceded them, when the saint notified the village that she would die, and gave strict orders not to bury her, because she would “revive” in seven days time. When she then “died” in accordance with her prediction, the village of Sushitsa faced a dangerous situation created by the undefined status of her body: a corpse which might be alive. (Usually near-death experiences happen unexpectedly and the person resuscitates barely in time to halt his own funeral.) Public opinion was split between two equally risky alternatives. Not to bury a corpse in a timely and proper manner would mean doing nothing to prevent death’s invasion into the world of the living [cf. Tilney 1970]. To disobey the orders of the saint, however, would mean provoking her rage and resulting in the village being punished. Finally the peasants adopted a policy of compromise. They did not initiate preparations for the funeral, but they took preliminary measures to protect themselves from Stoina’s potentially dead body: they locked it up in her room to isolate it from the living and to keep animals from jumping over it, which would mean it turned into a vampire.

Although the suggestion that Stoina be buried was intended to defend the traditional order, it is now retrospectively interpreted as doubt in her holiness that disgraces not only those who supported it, but even their descendants. The general tendency in all the folk material about this first near-death episode is to present it as the ultimate proof of Stoina's prophetic and thaumaturgic powers, and, consequently, as the event that confirmed conclusively the social recognition of her saintliness.

Naturally enough given her proven abilities Stoina knew exactly when and how she would die. The unsurprising prediction about her death was simply the final sign of her being one of "the very special living" and, simultaneously, the first indication of her joining the ranks of "the very special dead." (10) She died on December 22, 1933 in her room inside St. George's Church in Sushitsa and was buried in a special place next to the church. Her funeral is remembered in the district as an exceptional event. "It wasn't like other times. Many people and several priests came. The village priest made a speech. 'She was a holy woman,' he said. 'This woman was like Our Lord for us. Now our life is gone.'"

#### The Posthumous Cult and Its Impresarios

The death of Stoina coincided with a period of general decline in the village and the district as a whole. Especially after World War II small frontier settlements were gradually abandoned by younger people and fell into oblivion. The Sushitsa priest died in 1942 and was never replaced. The small church and the tomb of Stoina in its yard became as desolate as the village itself. All the consequences of sociopolitical change in the country were interpreted by the people in the district as resulting from Stoina's death. The community's patron saint had died and now the district was unprotected and forgotten. "After her death," our informants keep saying, "they forgot about us." This undefined "they" means the authorities, both secular and divine. Thus the temporary forgetting about Stoina is seen as another miracle, negatively emphasizing her patronage.

"The saint, however, did not let herself and her holy deeds be completely forgotten," reads her vita. In the 1980s she started "appearing" in the dreams of various people in the district with specific instructions: to restore her tomb, bring people there and write her vita. The folk veneration of Stoina began to mushroom.



*Venerable Stoina's Old and New Gravestones*

The Tomb. Her tomb became a focus of special attention. A new gravestone was ordered, the sexton began to light the lamp on the grave on the eve of Sundays and, more importantly, church holidays and commemoration feasts began to be organized at the tomb on the dates of Stoina's birth and death. Pilgrims regularly come to the tomb to light candles and leave gifts (mainly food), and take some earth from it away with them, believing it to possess curative powers, and often carrying it in a small bag as an amulet.



The insane are brought there to sleep overnight at the tomb -- a common therapeutic practice for insanity, conventionally associated in folk tradition with the shrines of established Christian saints.(11)

Various miracles have happened at Stoina's tomb signifying her posthumous saintly status. According to her vita a halo may appear around it, with Stoina herself "seen" coming out of the grave to cure pilgrims. Those who are disrespectful to the tomb are severely punished. Soon after she passed away two men tried to destroy her tomb "out of primitive atheism." One of them immediately became insane; the other one later died by accident. "You must not attempt to harm a saint," concludes the account of the episode in the vita instructively, "because God punishes you according to your deeds."



*Two icons of the Venerable Stoina, the second for sale at € 200*

### The Icons.

Another object of intense veneration is the other indication of Stoina's recent physical presence: her icons. The oldest was painted during Stoina's lifetime. One legend even claims that the blind woman painted it herself, adding a miraculous flavor to the act of its creation, thus supporting belief in its thaumaturgic powers. Another is the gift of a grateful artist whose child was cured by the saint from beyond the grave.

As a result of a veneration that was too active, the old icon was even set on fire by burning candles, but although it has now been singed in various places, it has lost neither its admirers nor its powers. A bottle of water is always kept close to the icons, as well as next to the icon of St. George downstairs, because people believe that when living saints come to visit, they may be thirsty. The sick sleep in the room under the icons "for their health." Pilgrims all test their righteousness by trying to stick coins on the surface of the icons: if the coin adheres, the person is thought to be righteous, if not, then he is a sinner.(12)

Photographs of the icons are widely distributed among believers. They are placed on the iconostases of many churches side by side with the icons of canonized saints and are included on many domestic iconostases together with the family's patron saints.

### The Vita.

The most essential element in the spontaneously developing folk cult of Stoina is her vita. At the beginning of the 1980s, Zoia Velikova, the granddaughter of Stoina's sister, began to have numerous dreams about her great aunt. Zoia interpreted this repetitive dream as a series of visions through which she was given an important message: Stoina is a saint and the sister of St. George, and she, Zoia, has been "chosen" to write the vita of her saintly relative under direct instructions from her.



*The Vita of the Venerable Stoina from the City of Sérrai, published 1998*

Zoia is a genuinely religious woman in her seventies who lives in Petrich, a town close to Sushitsa. She often gets together with other pious elderly women from the town. They visit churches and monasteries, read and exchange popular religious texts, mainly contemporary redactions of medieval apocrypha like *Epistoliiia za nedeliata* (Epistula de die dominica), *Suniat na Bogoroditsa* (Somnus Deiparae), etc.(13)

After being inspired by her dreams, Zoia, together with two other women from her circle, Elena Khadzhiiiova and Verka Veleva, started to record legends about Stoina: testimony to her sanctity. All the stories circulating about the saint of Sushitsa form in their totality her folk hagiography. The three "hagiographers" simply put together different bits and pieces of it in a flexible open structure and named this first text *Zhitieto na Prepodobna Stoina* [The Vita of the Venerable Stoina]. The vita itself reveals the mechanism of its creation: "What we have written has been recorded from many people, even as we were traveling through the countryside, and whatever people tell us, that we write down." The process of recording various stories is

present also in the structure of the text, in the middle of which there is a typical vita conclusion, after which various episodes are added by agglutination regardless of chronological order.

The expansion, rewriting and revision of the vita continued and is still in progress. The picture is especially complicated because different copies/variants show various degrees of deviation one from the other. Some of them add new episodes; others redistribute already existing ones, thus presenting compositional variants with only slight stylistic changes; in a third group stylistic changes are substantial, and so on. Most copies dating from the 1980s were made by Verka and Elena, but nowadays there are numerous second and third "generation" variants. In a manuscript tradition of this kind copies proliferate exponentially and the changes in the resulting texts are not only unpredictable but also synchronically impossible to view as a whole. What is observable, however, is the actual process of the folk creation of a hagiographical text, which can retrospectively illuminate similar medieval phenomena about which we only occasionally possess any data.(14)



“Prepodobna [Venerable] Stoina”  
Bottled Mineral Water

All the available variants reveal the deliberate intention to follow the hagiographical canon, although they are far from being paragons of the genre. The later copies reflect a tendency to increase the cohesion of the text by following more closely the chronology of related events, by introducing leitmotifs (e.g. the perceptible accumulation of vocabulary based on the Slavic root \*svet-, “light”), and by framing the episodes with admonitory formulae borrowed from the language of the liturgy. The text not only describes itself as a *zhitie* [vita], but also functions as one. It is read aloud as a sermon by priests at Stoina’s tomb on her commemoration days as well as after the Holy Liturgy in St. George’s Church in the town of Petrich. The elderly women from Zoia’s circle also often read it aloud when they meet, always making the sign of the cross before the reading, as

they would with any sacred text. Like many medieval vitae, the ultimate intention behind the text is to make the claim for canonization. This intention is declared openly in one of the marginal notes of the initial variant of the vita: “To be canonized.”

#### The Management of the Cult.

**Нов манастирски комплекс очаква дарители**

Два пъти бил осежаряван старият християнски храм, върху чиито основа е изградена църквата “Свети Георги Победоносец” край Златолист, община Сандански. Тук се съхранява си е жубала пророчката Стойна Препо-

добна, почитана до ден днешен от Васла.

В края на миналата година група интелектуалци, водени от стремежа да съхранят това свято българско място, създадоха инициативен комитет за изграждане на манастирски

комплекс около църквата “Свети Георги Победоносец”. Със същото начинание комитетът върба, че ще помогне за духовното възрождение на българина, ще укрепи съпротивителните му сили пред атаките на селкти и булгобе. Инициативите се надяват, че ще намерят подкрепата на многона християнобоби българя. Дарения могат да бъдат направени по банкова сметка **ТЕКСИМБАНК** - Лвов 2. бр. “Мария-Луиза” 107, Инициативен Комитет “Свети Георги Победоносец”, с. Златолист. В долари: 550 181 484 000 112 1018. В лева: 550 100 011 2110.

The model of the new monastery and bank account details for donations (*Demokratsia* Newspaper, 1995)

In the 1990s, following the fall of communism, the cult underwent the first stages of institutionalization.<sup>(15)</sup> Nowadays, a local tourist agency provides accommodation for the numerous pilgrims to Sushitsa, and organizes and advertises the services, followed by ritual eating and drinking at the tomb. New copies/variants of the vita and photographs of the saint’s icons are being disseminated throughout Bulgaria, and a short version of the vita with the blessing of a local priest from Petrich has been published in booklet form. The cult industry also includes a range of newly painted icons available to the religious souvenir market for up to €200 each, and local entrepreneurs have rushed to cash in on Stoina’s popularity by selling bottled mineral water named after her and advertised as a “Kiss from Paradise.”

The growing popularity of the cult finally reached the leading national newspapers, both secular and religious, where a number of accounts, both pro and contra Stoina’s as saint, were published. Political parties

began showing interest in the cult, resulting in a nationwide fund for the restoration of St. George's Church in Sushitsa and the construction of a new monastery complex around it. This initiative was advertised as "our patriotic duty" to "preserve this holy Bulgarian place," which in its turn will assist "the spiritual revival of the Bulgarians" as well as their "campaign against sects mushrooming in the country." (16) The reconstruction began in 1996 with the reburial of Stoina in a splendid new sepulchre, while the building of the new monastery is still in progress.



A Web-Page Promoting "Wine Tours" in the Melnik District

Thus the veneration of the "living saint of Sushitsa," initially restricted exclusively to its local folk milieu, not only gradually acquired all the elements of an Eastern Orthodox cult (veneration of the tomb, pilgrimages, feast days, icons, hagiographical texts), but also began to be used manipulatively in the socio-political life of the country.

## II. LIVING HOLINESS IN ITS FOLK INTERPRETATION

The key term "living saint" represents the most concise articulation of folk respect for the Venerable Stoina both in her lifetime when she acted as a local *vrachka* (clairvoyant and healer) in the region of Petrich, (17) and after her death when she acquired the major characteristics of a Christian saint. Her case thus unites the two groups of living saints that we have isolated for analytical purposes: healers and clairvoyants from the world of the living, and saints from the world of the dead. The material about her cult, therefore, offers an analytical perspective for revealing the common characteristics of the two groups that motivate their designation using a single folk term.

Two broader folk categories, that of sainthood and of life and death, corresponding to the two components of the metaphorical term, underlie the folk narratives about the Venerable Stoina and other living saints. Equally they challenge the insider's preconceptions and require further elucidation.

### A Saint In Need Is A Saint Indeed

Official hagiography presents saints as figures of an inner duality modeled on the principal dichotomy of the Christian universe. It counterposes two apparently incompatible aspects of saintliness: the intrinsic quality of being a saint, the result of divine election, and the transformational process of becoming a saint, the result of reproducing a series of exemplary acts. Thus only official Christianity offers simultaneously in the one

person a locus of miraculous power for support, and a paradigm of Christian behavior for imitation [cf. Cunningham 1980: 13ff].

Popular religion views sainthood exclusively in terms of divine election [cf. Sternberg 1925]: saints are chosen, they do not become. That is why in folk hagiography holy people may act as saints straightaway, the narratives about their miracles completely replacing the ecclesiastical review of the exemplary biography. This folk identity of saints solely as thaumaturgic agents also determines the type of hagiolatric communication in the folk milieu. Saints are viewed as figures of communal and personal support, as numinous helpers in time of crisis when only a miracle can restore the habitual order of life. Thus the complexities of their official Christian cult is reduced mainly to a patron-client agreement based on the principle of reciprocity: “veneration for help already received,” or, in its more profane variant, “give-and-take.”

Religious figures in Bulgarian popular religion(18) generally emerge as outstanding figures in their communities through a miraculous event, involving direct contact with the Other World, which is interpreted as a sign of their divine election and commonly articulated in folk discourse by the topos *bogova darba* [a gift from God]. In slightly different terms we may say that saint-making in popular religion is a process of recognizing divine election through social selection. The hagiolatric communities select their saints from among people who have publicly demonstrated their charisma, i.e. their divine gifts, of which curative and clairvoyant skills are the most typical. These qualities are attributed to the constant communication of living holy people with the Other World. Local healers and clairvoyants are believed to act under the immediate instruction and guidance of otherworldly saints and to work together with them for the welfare of the community. Thus living saintly people and long dead canonized saints, their different status in the eyes of the Church notwithstanding, do in fact share a common clientele and a common patron status in hagiolatric communities.

The heterogeneous group of earthly and heavenly numinous helpers in a given community has its own local hierarchy, which has little to do with the ecclesiastical rationale for their reputation, or its lack thereof. The place of the saints in the hierarchy of local religion is determined by their efficacy as proven by successful precedents, and by their activeness demonstrated in a variety of “apparitions” understood broadly as otherworldly intrusion into this world [cf. Christian 1981]. Successful precedents and apparitions govern both the local views about the saints’ specialization and the rituals for choosing personal or family saints, and patrons of churches and territorial or ethnic communities.(19)

The most famous saints in local religion receive the title “living,” an epithet, which if interpreted literally appears infelicitous, because it is awkwardly redundant in the case of those still alive and oxymoronic in the case of canonized saints. Its usage suggests that in this context “living” implies an additional quality directly related to the efficacy of their service to the community and the process of their social evaluation and hierarchization.

All the references to living saints in our material occur at the climax of narratives about holy figures, in which they have demonstrated their protection of communal values with maximum intensity. Thus one of the most popular legends about the Venerable Stoina included in her vita tells how she and St. George miraculously

saved her village of Dolna Sushitsa from being set on fire by a Turkish military squad. At the decisive moment St. George, on horseback, jumps out of the fresco above the church door to join Stoina in her single-handed resistance to the Turks. The narrative usually concludes with the exclamation: “Stoina is the sister of St. George. He is a living saint, and she is one too!”(20) Saints like St. George, St. Minas or St. John of Rila are commonly “seen” or “heard” walking in churches dedicated to them and their “corporeal” presence is otherwise registered across the territory of Bulgaria. It is not mere chance that it is precisely these saints who are credited with being “national guardians,” *svettsi-granichari* [protectors of the state’s frontier].(21) The icons of a living saint can be no less active, as the term *zhiva kuna* (living icon) demonstrates:(22) they can move, cry, heal and actively communicate with those who come to them for help. If other, “non-living” saints are saints only *in potentio* for the community, living saints are saints *in praesentio*. The others “remain on their icons,” we were told, but living saints “come out” of them to be part of the community through their actions, healing and protecting. Thus the modifier “living” emphasizes the immediate presence of the saints, their capacity to be perceived as acting within their hagiolatric communities.

This explains why the living saint is not a category fixed to a particular group of saints once and for all, but rather a conditional term designating a mobile and open group of community religious helpers. Saints are living when they are immediate benefactors in the here and now, and only so long as their activity remains beneficent for the community. If they stop being of help, the reverence displayed towards them is promptly replaced by veneration of one of their more efficient colleagues. Moreover, the community is expected to apply sanctions against “useless” saints, since they have violated the patron-client agreement. In this case canonized saints are ritually “punished” by hitting and breaking their icons(23) and expelling them from the village, just as “holy” clairvoyants and healers are publicly exposed as pseudo-saints, charlatans or witches.

We can conclude that the epithet “living” as an axiological modifier of the title “saint” is used in folk discourse not as an antonym of “dead,” but as a synonym of “acting” or “in use” (cf. the similar functions of this epithet in other folk set phrases like *zhiva voda*, “living water,” *zhiv vŭglen* “living charcoal,” *zhiv diavol* “living devil,” etc.). Its usage presupposes a functional distinction between active (useful) and passive (useless) saints that in popular religion replaces the more abstract ecclesiastical distinction between canonized and non-canonized saints.

#### The Living Saint As Liminal Figure

The fluid group of living saints has an ambivalent position between this and the Other World. Their existential status challenges our modern common-sense understanding of life and death and of the relation between them. In the cosmological views of the communities that we study the worlds of the dead and of the living are two discrete yet isomorphous parts of a common socio-communicative system [cf. Garnizov 1986: 25-26]. After death people are still capable of helping and harming their living descendants. They appear in the dreams of the living to offer warnings or helpful advice, or cause hailstorms if they have been insulted by the behavior of their fellow villagers. In a similar manner the acts of the living in this world can facilitate or cause problems in the existence after death of their kinsmen, in-laws, and other social partners. Whatever is given in

this world for the dead (food, clothes, etc.), becomes available to them in the Other World. If, however, people in this world cry too much for a deceased relative, it rains there and bothers the dead. In other words, a village folk community consists to a degree both of its living members and their dead ancestors.(24)

Always interested in providing maximum harmony in social relations, communities cultivate this interdependence between their living and dead members. They ritually fortify the existential barrier between them and restrict their contacts to special liminal zones in order to neutralize any possible harmful consequences from intercourse between the living and the dead. These are the spatial zone of the cemetery, which is believed to be in both this and the Other World, and the temporal zones of *zadushnitsa* [All Souls' Day] and the period from Easter to Pentecost when the dead are "dismissed" from Heaven for a family reunion [Marinov 1981: 561; cf. Georgieva 1985: 109-110].

Extraordinary members of the community, however, (healers, clairvoyants, witches and sorceresses among the living, saints and vampires among the dead) have the ability to cross the ultimate existential *limen* in both directions, something that places them between structures and beyond communal control. These "very special personas," if we may call them this, extending in a unorthodox manner Peter Brown's apt term [1981], are all "liminal figures" (liminars), liminality being interpreted here not as a particular state of transition, but rather as the potentiality to be betwixt and between [Turner 1969].

The "specialty" of the very special living is their ability if required to be present among the dead while they are still alive. Their near-death experiences can take various forms: clinical death or coma interpreted as a visit to Heaven and Hell; transitory death (witches are believed to be still-born and then to be brought back to life artificially),(25) possession, i.e. the "taking away" of living people by the dead (mandatory for both healers and sorceresses [Pócs 1989: 39-44]), metempsychosis (cf. the belief that every night the soul of a witch leaves her apparently dead body and travels as a butterfly [Marinov 1981: 308]). The passage from this world to the next is the ultimate expression of their liminality. It is the liminal period of transition from *neznanie* ("unknowingness," one of the folk terms for the near-death experience [Angelova 1948: 256]) to sacred knowledge. Reiterated through constant contact with the dead in a sort of a spiritual apprenticeship, it determines their extraordinary abilities: extrasensory perception, and power over disease, climate and fertility. Their transcendent experience is also linked to the presence of symbolic markers of death in their physical and social behavior, like blindness (clairvoyants), sterility or infertility, signs of physical decay like mold (witches), the use of "dead" or black entities in the practice of sorceresses (the water with which a corpse had been washed, eggs from a black hen, etc.).

The liminality of the very special dead is likewise manifested by their reappearance in this world. Unlike the ordinary dead they "return" to be among the living and this paradoxical existence between two worlds marks them with "life" qualities anomalous to their status of dead people: visibility, physical activity, the incorruptibility of their corpses (saints, vampires), their sexual potency and fertility (vampires).

From a functional viewpoint liminality is the ambivalent potentiality to help/harm beyond the restrictions of natural or social laws. Liminars thus exemplify with unprecedented intensity the ambiguity of the

life/death relationship that threatens the intended social harmony. In accordance with the principal ethical dualism of folk cosmology communities transform this problematic ambivalence by focusing positive liminal energy only onto certain liminars, conceived as helpers (saints, healers, clairvoyants) and the negative energy onto their alleged antagonists, the adversaries (vampires, demons, witches, sorceresses). The similar powers helpers and adversaries possess are attributed to the activity of antipodal forces (the divine gift vs. the Devil's work) and are interpreted antithetically. If both healers and sorceresses control disease, a healer cures people of them, while a sorceress inflicts them on others. Both saints and vampires tend to take revenge with terrifying cruelty, but vampires strike promiscuously, with no respect for justice and order, while saints punish in order to confirm the social structures for the benefit of the community as a whole. As a result of this interpretation the inherent amorphia of the liminal group is interiorized as a bipolar structure, and is sanctioned as such by corresponding paradigms of social interaction with it.

The functional classification of liminars into helpers and adversaries counterbalances the blurred dichotomy between the living and the dead. Helpers, as well as adversaries, act together across the existential border and the living members of each group are expected to join their otherworldly partners after death: witches and sorceresses are potential future vampires [Georgieva 1985: 111-112; Perkowski 1988: 451], just as healers and clairvoyants are presumed to be the heavenly saints-to-be. Such a classification presupposes unequivocal social behavior toward antipodal liminal agents. In the constellation of social links those deemed adversaries are *personae non grata*, communal felons, who are ostracized, persecuted and subjected to severe punishment.(26) According to communal norms both they and their clients are sinners, and that is why adversaries need to act secretly in secluded places and times. There is a tendency to eliminate these liminars forcibly from social structures, thus cleansing the community and reestablishing its threatened harmony. Helpers, on the contrary, are the focal points of the recurrent restoration of communal structures. Not only is their social status high, but the community itself gains prestige in the eyes of the outside world through them. They, and especially their vanguard, the living saints, are guarantees of social stability, prosperity and order, and their patronage is one of the most important ways of identifying the community as an autonomous social entity.

#### A Graphic Closure

Our analysis can be summarized in Figure 1 which represents the folk concept "living saint" as a

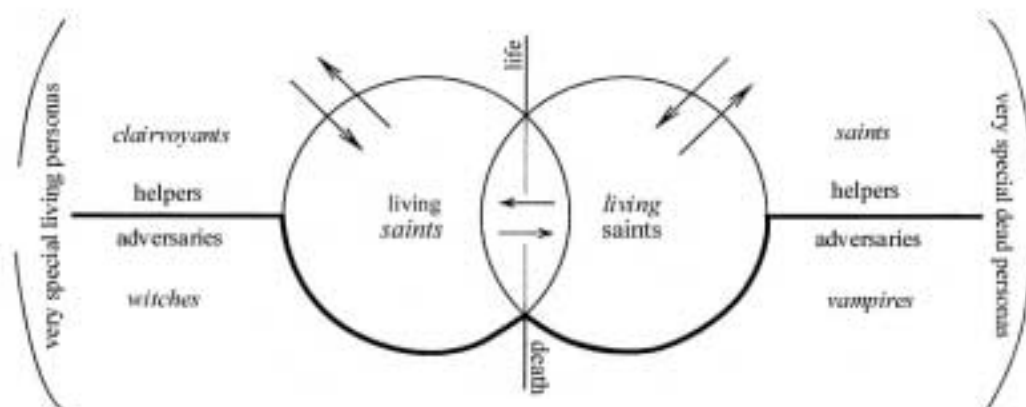


Figure 1



cross-section of four broader categories: the existential categories of living and dead, and the functional categories of helpers and adversaries.(27)

Based on a reconstruction of the context in which the term “living saint” operates, we have established that each of its two components has both functional and existential connotations. *Zhiv* can mean both “active” (functional) and “alive” (existential); *svetets* respectively, means “thaumaturgic helper” (functional) and “dead” or “having temporarily died” (existential). The term “living saint” as a functional designation, therefore, refers to the general characteristic of some very special living and dead folk agents to function as active helpers in their hagiolatric communities. At its existential register the term refers to the liminal status of these agents, which determines their capacity to act as otherworldly benefactors in this world.

#### NOTES

- 1 Preliminary versions of this article were read at the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Biennial Conferences on Balkan and South Slavic Linguistics, Literature and Folklore, held at the University of Chicago (1992) and Indiana University (1994) respectively. A Bulgarian translation of the second part appeared in the special issue “Christianity and Folklore”(ed. Katia Mikhailova) of the journal *Bŭlgarski folklor* [Vol. 26/3, 2000: 43-51]. We wish to express our gratitude to Prof. Norman W. Ingham, Prof. Bill Darden, Prof. Paul Friedrich, and Prof. James Fernandez for their valuable comments and suggestions.
- 2 An excellent survey of the polemics surrounding the term “popular religion” is O’Neil [1986]. For a well compiled bibliography of studies in popular religion, see Dinzelbacher [1990]; cf. Wilson [1983], where a specialized bibliography on the cult of saints is provided. Pioneer anthropological studies of Christian folk saints include articles by Romano [1965] and Macklin and Crumrine [1973], dealing with Latin American material, and Christian Jr. [1973], based on Western European cults. More important subsequent contributions in the field are the book by Best [1983], the symposium papers on saints and near-saints edited by Macklin and Margolies [1988], and the case studies of Padre Cícero Romão Batista (1844-1934, Brazil) by Slater [1986], Fray Leopoldo de Alpandere (1864-1956, Spain) by Slater [1990], and Padre Pio da Pietralcina (1887-1968, Italy) by McKevitt [1991a and 1991b].
- 3 See Izmirlieva and Ivanov [1991b]; cf. also the short descriptions of Bona Velinova and Vanga Dimitrova in notes 14 and 16 below. On similar cases among other Balkan peoples see Kazimirović [1940: 457-526], Pavlović [1965: 209-53] and Blum [1970: 48-51, 62-63]. The only short description of near-saint phenomena from the Balkan Slavic region hitherto available in English is information about the holy woman of Retchane (first half of the 20th century) given in Obrebski [1977: 16-17].
- 4 Cf. similar observations in Woodward [1990: 17], who claims that, canonically speaking, a living saint is “a contradiction in terms,” since the Christian Church considers the death of the holy person as a *conditio sine qua non* for canonization.

- 5 The material on which the following description is based was collected 1985-2001 by the authors, initially with the support of the Institute of Folklore at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and the Department of Old Bulgarian Literature at St. Climent of Ohrida University in Sofia. Our informants are mainly from Zlatolist, a small mountainous village in South Western Bulgaria, close to the ancient towns of Melnik and Petrich [for a description of the region see Gibbons 1980]. The village is more popularly known by its old name (Dolna) Sushitsa, which was in official use until 1951. Part of the recorded material and two versions of Stoina's vita were published in the journal Bŭlgarski folklor [Izmirlieva and Ivanov 1990; 1991a].
- 6 In another variant Stoina lost her sight in a whirlwind. According to folk belief, the souls of the dead or of *samovili* [wood-nymphs] spin in a whirlwind. They not only cause blindness to whomsoever they manage to take away, but also endow him or her with clairvoyant abilities [see Kolev 1980: 78-79].
- 7 The source material about the events of 1913 directly concerning the region of Sérrai were published in English by Anastasoff [1977: 308-14].
- 8 This interpretation is included in the most common Bulgarian folk terms for the phenomenon: *prenasiane* "the act of crossing or being carried across a barrier," and *primirane* "the state of being dead for a while" vs. *umirane* "the act of dying." On Bulgarian near-death folklore see Marinov [1981: 274-75, 322]. A wide-ranging and detailed picture of similar East Slavic materials is provided by Bilij [1930]; for observations on the "genre" of "visits to the Other World" as presented in folk texts from Poles'e, see Tolstoi and Tolstaia [1979]. A good cross-cultural study on the subject is Zaleski [1987].
- 9 See Georgieva and Garnizov [1989: 117]. Presenting the world of the dead as a "village, where God is the local mayor" [Slaveikoff 1904: 51] is also typical of other folk texts (songs, fairy-tales, etc.). More broadly, the vision of the Other World, as documented in near-death accounts, fits the heterogeneous picture of life after death constructed in folk ballads (especially the motif, "a sacred person visits the dead" [see Vranska 1940: 172-83]), as well as a corpus of religious eschatological texts (apocrypha, *Visionsliteratur*, the iconography of the Last Judgment, etc. [see Matl 1971]).
- 10 The interpretation of saints as "very special personae" is suggested by Peter Brown's [1981] concept of canonized saints as "the very special dead" of the Christian Church, as well as by Blum's [1970] notion, "the extraordinary dead" from his ethnography of Greek "rural religion." We unpack the rich implications of Brown's concept by applying it to living saints and introducing the term "the very special living."
- 11 At the tomb of St. Naum in Ohrid, for example, such practice has been registered since the early 19th century [Grigorovich 1915: 152].
- 12 The ancient roots of this practice are discussed by Katsarov [1933: 195].
- 13 For the contemporary oral and written tradition of these texts among the Balkan Slavs see Kretzenbacher [1975] and Badalanova [1993].

- 14 See, for example, the commentary of Theodoros Balsamon († after 1195) to canon 63 of the Quini-Sext (Trullan) Ecumenical Council: “His Holiness, Lord Patriarch Nicolaus Muzalon, as he found the vita of St. Paraskeva who was worshipped at the village of Kalikratia, a vita written by a peasant ignorantly and unworthy of the angel-like life of the saint, ordered it to be committed to the flames and assigned the task to deacon Basilic of writing her vita in a manner pleasing to God.” [Balsamon 1865: 733c].
- 15 Another example of an institutionalized cult is that of Bona Velinova (1882-1960), the professional prophet of the religious movement “The Good Samaritan,” which was extremely popular in Bulgaria between 1925 and 1944. The movement had its own newspaper, published numerous books and had organizations throughout the country [see Izmirlieva and Ivanov 1991b: 7].
- 16 In the newspaper Demokratsia No. 1549, Mar. 8, 1995, p. 8. cf. Dneven Trud. No. 92, Mar. 2, 1995, p. 2; Standart. No. 976, June 4, 1995, p. 33. In the autumn of 2002 the Bulgarian TV channels “SKAT” and “2001” broadcast a 25 minute documentary about the Venerable Stoina followed by a studio discussion led by the journalist Antonina Topalova. For an argument against Stoina’s cult, see Tsurkoven Vestnik. No. 23, Dec. 1, 2001, also available at [http://web.hit.bg/CV102/23-yyyy/prepodobna\\_stoina.htm](http://web.hit.bg/CV102/23-yyyy/prepodobna_stoina.htm).
- 17 The successor to Stoina in the region is Vanga Dimitrova (1911-1996), the blind oracle from Petrich who is the most famous contemporary Bulgarian *vrachka* [see Ostrander and Schroeder 1970; Perkowski 1995; Valtchinova 1998; Iliev 2000]. The biography and powers of Vanga and Stoina are strikingly similar, and the stories about their call and the circumstances under which they became blind are completely identical. The two women are presented by our informants as congruent patrons of the community and related by spiritual kinship. Vanga seems to approve of these analogies, since she is actively involved in the creation of Stoina’s cult. The linking of the *vrachka* from Petrich with the saint of Sushitsa in the popular mind and in folk discourse is even more significant when set against the rather different socio-political forms of their practice. While Stoina’s activities were always Christian in their external manifestations, Vanga never openly committed herself to any religion. Moreover, her activities were supported by the state, and she was used by the communist élite, including Todor Zhivkov’s family [see Sokoloff 1990 and Kinzer 1995].
- 18 In the rich Bulgarian folk nomenclature for religious and quasi-religious specialists [see Marinov 1981: 339-47 and Conrad 1987: 559] the generic term is *vrach* (and especially its feminine counterpart *vrachka*), which implies both curative abilities and extrasensory perception. For more information about folk-doctors in the Balkans, see Kemp [1935: 205-28].
- 19 The most popular ritual for choosing a patron saint is *khvashtane na svetets* [literally “the catching of a saint”]. Several candles named for the candidate saints are lit and whichever burns the longest, that person is then proclaimed the patron saint, the durability of the flame being interpreted as a sign of the saint’s vitality and eagerness to become involved in the affairs of the community.

- 20 See Izmirlieva and Ivanov [1990: 83-84, No. 11; 1991a: 69-70, Nos 37 and 76, No. 65]. Similar plots are extremely popular in Bulgarian (and more broadly in Balkan) folklore. In English see the legend about St. John of Rila who “came out” of his icon to save his monastery from a Turkish invasion [Thornton 1939: 251-252].
- 21 A good illustration is the legend of how “St. George did not permit the Greeks to enter the country” during the Greek-Bulgarian border incident in 1925 [see Izmirlieva and Ivanov 1991a: 69, No. 36; the historical background to the event is given by Barros 1970].
- 22 See, for example, Vakarelski [1935: 238]. Living saints are also believed to oppose actively the censoring of their icons, because only the dead should be censored [Boiadzhieva 1993: 119].
- 23 See Markov [1907: 46-47]; cf. Uspenskii [1982: 114-16, 182-86] for parallel cases among the Eastern Slavs.
- 24 In the Bulgarian context the social unity of the living and the dead is exemplified by the ritual *kanene za praznik* [invitation to a feast]. At all important calendar or family feasts peasants invite both their living and dead relatives using analogous ritual attributes, and performing analogous ritual acts. The dead, especially those who have recently passed away, are individually invited at their graves (conceived of as their homes), and later, during the feast itself, they are assigned places next to the living at the common festive *trapeza* [the table with ritual food on it]; cf. also the custom of inviting dead relatives to weddings [Ivanova 1987: 31-32].
- 25 See Marinov [1981: 307]. A variant of being still-born is to be born at “death time,” known in Bulgaria mainly as the “unclean time” (*mrŭsni dni*; the period between Christmas and Epiphany [cf. Conrad 2001]), which is a precondition for the person to become a witch or/and turn into a vampire after death; cf. Pócs [1989: 77, note 154]. The birth of other figures in Bulgarian folk demonology is also linked to death: the plague, for example, is believed to be born of a dead mother.
- 26 Vampires are exterminated usually by professionals called *vampiradzhi* [“vampire-killers” [Beynen 1988: 458-59]; living adversaries are battered to death when caught in the act, publicly disgraced and often excommunicated.
- 27 The absence of a negative counterpart to living saints in our chart reflects the absence of a well constituted head of the adversaries in Bulgarian folk cosmology. This lacuna alone is a notable fact that raises interesting theoretical questions, which, however, go beyond the scope of our present discussion, since it is focused primarily on the cosmological status of the saintly figure.

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The Ethical Values of *Narodnoe Pravoslavie*: Traditional Near-Death  
Experiences and Fedotov (1)

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In 1935 the emigré scholar G. P. Fedotov published an analysis of the ethical values of popular Russian Orthodoxy, basing his conclusions on the genre of *dukhovnye stikhi* (lit. spiritual verses). These religious songs were performed before the Revolution by the blind itinerant singers known as the *kaleki* or *kaliki perekhozhie* [Fedotov 1935/1991].(2) For Fedotov the key features of folk Orthodoxy (*narodnoe pravoslavie*) were the emphasis on life as suffering, the profound sinfulness of man, the belief in the power of Christian love and the attachment to Mother Earth (*Mat' syra zemlia*) and maternal values in general, with their supreme embodiment in the Mother of God. His view has proved highly influential outside Russia, largely through its distillation in the opening chapter of volume one of *The Russian Religious Mind* [Fedotov 1946]. Fedotov's influence has perhaps been reinforced by the coincidences between his own concept of folk Orthodoxy and key aspects of Dostoevskii's view of the people (*narod*), itself based to a considerable extent on the writer's reading of the *dukhovnye stikhi* [Ivanits 2002; Wigzell 2002b:28-31].(3) In Russia where Fedotov's work began to appear only in 1989, his views have had less impact, while, among folklorists, there is a new interest in and awareness of the complexities of folk ethics [Belova 2002]. In this essay I question the validity of Fedotov's analysis for popular Orthodoxy as a whole by examining another of the genres of religious folklore, the type of vision known as the *obmiranie*.

So unfamiliar is the *obmiranie*, except to some folklorists and traditional Orthodox believers, that a definition would seem in order. The term *obmirat'*, self-evidently linked to *umirat'* (to die), refers both to the state of falling into/being in a coma as well as to the narrative account of what is seen during a coma, that is, essentially a near-death experience. To this day among traditional believers (official Orthodox or Old Believers) in rural Russia as in other Orthodox Slavic countries, the near-death experience is generally believed to consist of a journey to the world beyond the grave.(4) Here the subject most commonly meets relatives, sees the torments of hell and learns the date of his or her own death. Obviously these narratives represent a continuation of early and medieval Christian tradition (Dante's *Divine Comedy* is the supreme literary example.) Visits to the world beyond the grave were traditionally experienced not only during coma but also as dreams, or, when awake, as visions, but in Orthodox Slavic countries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries such visions are linked primarily with a coma or unusually prolonged and deep sleep. Indeed, it is traditionally assumed that anyone in this state will visit the afterlife, and in particular hell. During the vision, even when heaven is mentioned, the specific virtues of the blessed are not. Consequently, the ethical emphases of the *obmiranie* have to be judged largely from the sins mentioned, whether those of categories of sinners, or specific people known to the visionary, including his or her own moral failings. Within the Byzantino-Slavic Orthodox tradition considerable differences exist between accounts of visits to heaven and hell, allowing the visionary to select

from a wide range of possible choices those sins and values he or she deems most significant. Here religious affiliation, social background, gender and regional traditions may, it will be argued, also play a role.

Given that Fedotov wrote about Russian rather than East Slav folk Orthodoxy as a whole, I have drawn most of my examples from Russian material, but have included Poles'e on the borders between Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, where the linguistic dividing line between the various East Slavic languages is not always clear. At times I shall refer to Ukrainian material, because the differences between Russian and Ukrainian tradition in this respect are no greater than those between local Russian traditions.<sup>(5)</sup> Of the contemporary texts, around thirty are oral narratives, almost all recorded since 1974, though the event described may have occurred much earlier. A further four are written texts, composed since 1950, but undergoing oral or printed transmission in subsequent years. I shall compare these with oral and written narratives from between 1830 and the Revolution (a further sixteen).<sup>(6)</sup>

Fedotov notes that the popular ethical values of the *dukhovnye stikhi* differ in various respects from those of the official Church. The three main categories he discerns are interrelated. The first, the sin of offending Mother Damp Earth has links with the *gens* religion of the ancient Slavs, and thus includes sins against parents (especially mothers) and relatives. Clearly connected to folk attitudes about Mother Earth is the veneration of the Mother of God, the supreme embodiment of maternal love and caring intercession for those who suffer. Reverence for the Mother of God is matched by an intense sense of sinfulness and sorrow at offences against Christian love and the innocent suffering caused by man's cruelty and injustice to man. One of the primary emphases in the *dukhovnye stikhi* concerns the unjust treatment of the poor by the greedy and heartless rich, a theme found in other oral genres such as the tales of everyday life (*bytovaia skazka*) and folk religious legends (*legenda*) [Ivanits 2002]. The category of sins against the Christian law of love includes for Fedotov not only the lack of charity towards others, but also the sin of scandal mongering. Perhaps the most conventional group involves sins resulting from the non-observance of Church laws and prohibitions (such as neglecting prayers, church attendance, ignoring major festivals, fasts or ritual actions associated with Wednesdays and Fridays.) Other sins are mentioned sporadically: breaches of moral purity as well as theft or lies (scandal mongering apart) seldom appear, though Fedotov does cite a variant of the song about the Last Judgement in which the damned include drunkards, adulterers, pimps and those involved in laughter culture (*smekhovaia kul'tura* [Likhachev, Panchenko, Ponyrko 1984]) [Fedotov 1935/1991:89]. As can be seen, the various transgressions he highlights embrace both the sin of the individual before God, the evil that man does to his fellows (social sins), and sins against the Church's teaching and prescriptions.

Turning to *obmiranie* narratives, it is clear that there are considerable differences of emphasis. Much of the reason for this lies in the social situation and gender of visionaries. Whereas, judging from the nineteenth-century ethnographer S. V. Maksimov's observations, the *kaleki perekhozhie* were predominantly if not exclusively male [Maksimov 1877/1989], visionaries, at least after 1830, are almost exclusively women [Wigzell 2003]. What is more, most are wives, mothers and ordinary laywomen, though there are a small number who belong to a monastic community. By contrast, the *kaleki perekhozhie* had neither home nor family,

and, though not formally attached to the Church, led a life devoted to Orthodoxy; they would be found singing their mournful songs beside church doorways and at monastery gates on feast days. Since their material was drawn from the Bible, apocrypha and hagiography, they were, though illiterate, much better informed about Orthodoxy than most peasants (to whom, we may assume, most village *obmiravshie* belonged). In Fedotov's view, *kaleki perekhozhie* represented the summit of religious knowledge and understanding among the folk (in contradistinction to the most unenlightened sectors of the population (*samaia temnaia ... sreda*) [Fedotov 1935/1991:15]. Today, after decades of official hostility and repression, the general level of religious knowledge in the village is considerably lower than before the Revolution, although religious belief remains a given. The situation is in many respects worse in urban areas. If we compare the respective amounts of detail in pre- and post-revolutionary *obmiraniia*, it becomes clear how much less familiar lay visionaries are nowadays with the Christian visionary tradition and the teachings of the Church more generally [Tolstaia 2002: 215]. There is another important difference: *kaleki perekhozhie* formed a specific social group, whereas visionaries come from more varied backgrounds. Most are peasants, but those who feature in written texts tend to come from a more educated or urban environment, and to be better versed in Church teaching and traditions. A few come from a monastic or ecclesiastical milieu. While narratives reflect the different environments, periods and origins (oral/written), their shared features permit us to generalize about a broader popular Orthodox view of morality than in the spiritual songs. On the other hand, how do circumstance and gender factors affect moral emphases, and hence how can any one genre provide an accurate snapshot of folk ethical values?

In view of the differing social and gender context of the *obmiranie*, a shift in the moral emphasis towards matters affecting women in their everyday lives seems inevitable, especially when it concerns their traditional role of ensuring the wellbeing of family and friends. Narratives that emerge from a rural environment (the majority) can be expected to reflect the moral concerns of the wider village community. If we begin with the maternal element, which for Fedotov lies at the core of his conception of folk Orthodoxy [Nikitina 1991: 141], we see that maternal concerns (including the broader concept of caring for friends and neighbors) are also extremely important in the *obmiranie*, but in ways that differ from those in the religious songs. Hardly surprisingly, the cult of Mother Earth is absent from narratives, though evident in traditional funeral ritual. On the other hand, both narratives and songs share the sense of the sinfulness of life on earth.

More surprising is the virtual absence of the Mother of God in the role of intercessor or guide round the Other World. Her connection with the afterlife was widely known thanks to the popularity of the apocryphal Pilgrimage of the Mother of God among the Torments (*Khozhdenie Bogoroditsy po mukam*) among Old Believers, and, via the *dukhovnye stikhi*, with official Orthodox believers. In it the Mother of God begs her Son to alleviate the suffering of sinners observed on her tour of Hell. If we bear in mind her association with a guided tour round hell, the deep reverence in which she was held and the capacity for variation in the oral visionary tradition, it might be expected that she would sometimes act as an otherworldly guide in the *obmiranie*, even though in the Pilgrimage she, like the visionary, is led not leading. However, normally the guide is either a close relative (male or female) or an old man/saint (this last conforming to tradition). The only

text to name her directly as a guide is the written vision of Klavdiia Ustiuzhanina (1964), where the subject is shown the torments by the Mother of God [Gubanov 2000:11-14]. There are, however, two oral narratives that refer to “a woman like a nun” and “a woman in a cloak,” both of whom possibly represent the Mother of God [Lur’e and Tarabukina 1994:23].

Otherwise it is only Klavdiia’s vision that makes any reference to her role as intercessor, though not in the same way as in the Pilgrimage. Though grieved by what she sees, the Mother of God declares herself unable to change the fate of those in hell. In its message that only the prayers of those on earth can save souls in torment, the text reflects Church teaching about the importance of prayers for the dead, and of repentance and moral reform by the living (the key message of the *obmiranie* genre) [Gubanov 2000:14].(7) Apart from this, Mary’s function in the vision of Klavdiia and four other written narratives is more distantly connected to the caring maternal virtues mentioned by Fedotov and the intercessory role she plays in the Pilgrimage. All five texts come from a monastic environment or circles of active believers, both official Orthodox and Old Believer: the visions of Klavdiia Ustiuzhanina (1964) [Gubanov 2000], of the novices, Fekla (1902) [Panteleimon 1996] and an anonymous young man [Nazidatel’nyi rasskaz 1915], as well as of the Old Believer Agniia (1956-57) [Pokrovskii 1997] and an anonymous laywoman [Panteleimon 1996:126]. In these texts the Mother of God’s role is to decide that the visionary can return to earth to continue living, or convey a message of that nature. Thus in the vision of Agniia, a Siberian Old Believer text written after 1953, the Mother of God intercedes with Christ to grant the visionary three more days of life [Pokrovskii 1997:40]. In the visions of both novices the Mother of God descends from above and decides that it is too early for them to die [Panteleimon 1996:50; Nazidatel’nyi rasskaz 1915:14-15], and in the vision of Klavdiia she helps the visionary return to earth after Christ has decided it is not yet time for her to die [Gubanov 2000:14-15].(8)

For the most part, the vision relies on the bleaker depictions found in apocryphal texts and on the iconography of the Last Judgment [Mil’kov 1999; Rovinskii 1881:391-402; Goldfrank 1995], both of which warn of the need for repentance and change. The image of the Mother of God as successful intercessor for souls in torment seems not to have featured in oral visions, judging by the extant texts, including a large number from Poles’e analysed by Bilyi [1930:64-65]. With the exception of the two narratives mentioned above, and the occasions when a female relative takes on the role, the otherworldly guide is always male. It would be preposterous to suggest that the reason for the absence is that village visionaries are more familiar with Orthodox tradition than those from circles close to the Church, where the Pilgrimage has had greater influence. The reason may well lie instead in the attitude of the visionary to the main traditional function of the *obmiranie*, the moral warning. In village narratives, as will be seen, the caring maternal element finds its outlet in consoling meetings with relatives. This leaves the visionary free to focus (albeit while unconscious in a coma) on the sins that she most deplors, whether general categories, such as drunkenness, abortion, sorcery, or specific people guilty of such sins. The guilty can be located in the fires of Hell without the need for intercession. This opposition between love and condemnation is not absolute. Oral narratives where a visionary seeks remission for a sinner who is a family member exist, but they are rare [e.g. Dobrovol’skaia 1999:no. 6].

It might be assumed that, given the traditional respect for the older generation, the maternal theme in *obmiranie* narratives would take the form of the sins of children against their mothers or parents, but in fact it does not. Offences against fathers almost never feature; just a single example in the written vision of Vera (1962), where a little girl, encountered in the Other World, turns out to have sinned by uttering four offensive words to her father. She sends back a message: “Tell my little brother Pavlik not to be rude to his mother and father, because it’s an unforgivable sin” (*A bratu Pavliku skazhite, tetia Vera, pust’ ne oskorbliaet ottsa i mat’, a to neprostitel’nyi grekh*) [Cherednikova 2001:244]. A more common paternal image is the reverse scenario, where the father (never the mother), though not directly guilty of an offence against his children, is condemned for his moral failings; for example, in one dream narrative the subject’s father languishes in hell because of his lack of charity [Lur’e, Tarabukina 1994:no. 4]. If fathers are sometimes seen in hell, mothers are more often in heaven. The best example is a narrative from Sudogda region, Vladimir oblast’, where the subject, this time a man, sees his father suffering because he was a drunkard, while his long-suffering pious mother is in a place of flowers and heavenly birds [Dobrovol’skaia 1999:no. 6].(9)

This last account bears a strong moral message, but very often in highly folklorized *obmiraniia* the main function of the journey to the Other World is a consoling encounter rather than a moral lesson. The visionary is reunited with her parents [Lur’e and Tarabukina 1994:24], or family members. For example, A. N. Redova from Kargopol’e, who recorded her own dreams, described how she was reunited with her beloved sister, Nast’ia, who had died in 1947 [Pigin 1997a:45; Semenova: II, 4]. The visionary may also meet villagers and friends.(10) Such meetings provide personal consolation, or allow it to be offered to friends and neighbors, who learn about their own dear departed. Occasionally an element of reassurance is involved, when the visionary is able to dispel the fear that the person who has died has gone to hell. The consoling meeting with the dead reflects not only the female authorship of the overwhelming majority of narratives but also the *gens* religion, with its concern for the dead seen in the traditional funeral rite. It is simply a different manifestation of ancestor worship from that found in the *dukhovnye stikhi*.

Among female *obmiravshie* the commonest maternal worries concern their own or their friends’ dead children. At one level this may result in a comforting meeting in the Other World with a daughter [Lur’e, Tarabukina 1994:no. 1], or with a son who had died in the Second World War [Tolstaia 1999:no.2]. Sometimes the concern with dead children is more general, simply wanting to know they are happy, as in a narrative recorded in 1994 in Kargopol’e where the visionary reassures her neighbor that her dead son is now walking behind the priest carrying the processional candle in church [Folklore laboratory: from A. M. Popova, Verkhov’e vill., Tikhman’ga]. A more common occurrence, certainly in times past, was the death of a baby. When infant mortality was very high, and every mother might have lost at least one child, concern with their fate in the Other World was natural when the Church and with it the laity held that unbaptized children would go to hell [Vlasova 2001]. As far as baptized children are concerned, judging by material recorded in the pre-Revolutionary period, it would appear peasant women, however distressed by the death of a baptized infant, were better able to resign themselves to their loss than women from urban and educated circles with their

modern sensibilities and higher expectations of life. Grief and concern about deceased children is the dominant theme in narratives from this environment. One particularly interesting written narrative tells of a woman from Baku whose newborn child was, she is led to believe, baptized before his death. In a vision she sees the child suffering. It then transpires that the godparents who had secretly had an affair, something which ruled them out as godparents. They had then lied about having the child baptized [Panteleimon 1996:124-32]. As child mortality decreased during the Soviet period, concern with dead children and whether they were baptised becomes less apparent, although the anxiety that this aspect of Orthodox teaching must induce doubtless contributes to its endurance. For example, in a narrative recorded in Tver' oblast' in 1988 the visionary sees baptised children eating, while those who were not baptized are starving and immersed in water [Lur'e, Tarabukina 1994:no. 3].

In general, the concern for children has in recent times shifted mainly to abortion. Always regarded as a serious sin by Church and laity alike [Gromyko 2001: 221], abortion is nonetheless not mentioned in pre-Revolutionary narratives as often as suicide, lack of charity or sorcery. Nor is abortion a sin mentioned by the predominantly male *kaleki perekhozhie*, and hence by Fedotov. By contrast, in modern narratives the fate of those who have had abortions is described frequently, often in graphic detail [e.g Lur'e, Tarabukina 1994:no. 1; Semenova 2000:III, 8; Gubanov 2000:9; Dobrovol'skaia 1999:no. 2; Tolstaia 1999:nos 7, 8; Tolstaia 2001:225-26; Paunova 2001:194].(11) This increased emphasis appears to result from a situation, in which abortion, long condemned by the Church, became the officially sanctioned method of contraception [Moroz 2000:202]. What we have here is either the moral disapproval of those who had not had abortions, or the conscious or sub-conscious guilt of those who had disobeyed the Church and had abortions. It is particularly women who express their abhorrence of abortion; male visionaries do not mention it. Both *dukhovnye stikhi* and *obmiraniia* therefore reflect a concern with maternal values, but in this area gender as well as time and social circumstances affect both focus and emphasis.

There are other parallels between the ethical values of the spiritual songs as seen by Fedotov and those of the *obmiranie*. One such is the disapproval of laughter culture. In its narrowest sense, it has been linked to the mocking, even lewd humor of the professional entertainers (*skomorokhi*) of the pre-Petrine period [Likhachev, Panchenko, Ponyrko 1984], and later to fairground humor, but is easily extended, especially by the pious, to include all manner of frivolity (*sueta*) and secular entertainment. It is hardly surprising that in the pre-Revolutionary period this motif survived best in communities that felt themselves besieged by the secular world, such as the monastery or the Old Believers. For example, the vision of Pelageia (*Videnie devitsy Pelagei*), probably originally from an Old Believer environment in the 1850s-1860s, condemns singing, dancing, joining in Yuletide rituals and even listening to songs [Gritsevskaiia, Pigin 1993:55, 60-62]. Similar sentiments may appear in twentieth-century lay *obmiraniia*, because the communities from which visionaries come faced the same difficult task of defending a Christian way of life from the secular world, as well as modernisation and the new socialist religion. Some Old Believer narratives continue the condemnation of laughter culture, but this feature is not unique to them: the written vision of Klavdiia Ustiuzhanina (1964) depicts theatre and

cinemagoers as servants of the devil. Other visionaries criticize dressing up and going out [Tolstaia 1999:no. 7 from Gomel' obl. in Poles'e], singing, dancing and attending weddings [Shevarenkova 1998:no. 158 from Nizhnii Novgorod obl.], or even the wearing of earrings [Semenova 2000:III, 8 from Kargopol'e].

Fedotov assigned laughter culture to the category involving sins of Christian non-observance, since it could include blasphemy and irreligious behaviour, an important theme in the spiritual songs. He also noted the emphasis in the religious songs on external expressions of piety, such as non-attendance at church and failure to observe Church fasts, rules and prohibitions, including those relating to Fridays. Judging by the numerous complaints in the journal *Rukovodstvo dlia sel'skikh pastyrei* (Guidance for rural priests) in the decades before the Revolution, the Church certainly disapproved of the peasants' irregular church attendance, but, far from insisting on the special nature of Fridays, it campaigned against what it saw as pagan beliefs surrounding activities on that day [Rozov 2001]. Predictably, the *obmiraniia* of those who come from religious environments (monastery, church or religious community) contain the same canonical emphasis on pious observance [Nazidatel'nyi rasskaz 1915:7-8; Panteleimon 1996:46; Gubanov 2000:10, 13]. Pre-Revolutionary peasant visions, on the other hand, barely mention churchgoing, though they encounter in hell those who ignored the ritual prescriptions relating to church festivals and Fridays [Selivanov 1886:70-71 on Voronezh province; c.f. Bilyi 1930:78]. In written visions from lay environments, which were often recorded by priests the position is much closer to that of the Church.

Oral visions go one stage further and condemn aspects of ritual observance with no connection to Christianity. The confusion between ritual proscriptions relating to the mythological worldview and Christian rules is characteristic of the ethical views of all Orthodox Slavic peoples. In fact, for them the concept of sin (*grekh*) embraces not only sins in the eyes of the Church and neglect of ritual convention, but even breaches of ritual and social conventions more generally [Tolstoi 1995; Tolstaia 2000; Gromyko 2001: 218-23; Belova 2002: 179-82; Moroz 2000: 202]. This confusion has affected the contemporary *obmiranie*. Generally speaking, only narratives such as Klavdiia Ustiuzhanina's (1964), which was publicized by the Church, or those from isolated religious communities such as the Old Believer Lipovans, continue to focus on the neglect of prayers, fasting and religious festivals [Gubanov 2000; Paunova 2001:195].(12) In oral texts there often appears to be no distinction between religious norms, social conventions, or ritual prescriptions connected with the mythological world view. In some narratives from Kargopol'e, where this process seems to have developed the furthest, what worries visionaries most are offences against the rules of everyday household existence such as not washing tablecloths and underwear together [Moroz 2000:200]. The explanation for this change seems obvious: seventy plus years of socialist rule, the closure of churches and absence of priests. The decline in the Church's influence has allowed the broader folk concept of sin to penetrate the oral religious genre of the *obmiranie*. The result in the narratives from Kargopol'e is an emphasis on sins related to doing the laundry, or loaning a neighbour the broom used in baking bread (*pomelo*), as well as those from other areas expressing dislike of modern ways, such as of women who do not cover their heads [Dobrovol'skaia 1999:no. 5]. All of these at the same time reflect the role of gender in the genre [Wigzell 2003].

Drunkenness is a sin that is extremely important to the moral world of visionaries. The well-known legend about the drunkard who had to act as the devil's carthorse may have encouraged its appearance in the *obmiranie*, but Slavic Orthodox tradition had long held that drinking led to perdition, and indeed was a form of suicide [Vlasova 2001:129-30]. Long a social problem, efforts to combat the love of the bottle were hampered by obligatory ritual drinking at Church festivals involving the village priest and adult male villagers, together with the general Russian perception that a capacity for hard liquor is a part of national identity, at least for men [Kormina 2001: 234-38]. The drunkenness of husbands is an acute problem for women and their families; hence it is not surprising that female visionaries, both before the Revolution and since, should mention the fate that befalls alcoholics [Zheleznov 1910/1992:346; Paunova 2001:195; Dobrovol'skaia 1999:nos 6, 10; Vinogradov 1923:313; Panteleimon 1996:46]. Fedotov also incorporates what he calls this "Russian sin" into his picture of folk Orthodoxy, citing a song in which the Mother of God condemns drinking for its impact on society [Fedotov 1935/1991:90], and noting that it is also among the sins listed in the song about the Last Judgement. In this respect the two genres agree.

A key element of folk piety for Fedotov concerns an emphasis on social injustice, especially the mean and heartless treatment of the poor and innocent by the rich and powerful. The strong sense of social justice and sympathy for the suffering are common to many folk genres, and in pre-Revolutionary Russia at least were viewed as a facet of the national character. *Obmiraniia* from that period are no different: cruelty and uncharitable behaviour land the guilty in hell, and, conversely, acts of charity bring salvation. Thus the novice Fekla learns in her vision that the scarf she once gave a poor woman outweighs her sins [Panteleimon 1996:45; see also Gritsevskaiia, Pigin 1993:60; Shevchenko 1999:28; Bilyi 1930:70]. Nonetheless, with the exception of the Ukrainian text published by Kulish [Kulish 1856], this motif is generally much less prominent in visions than in the *dukhovnye stikhi*, for the obvious reason that the *kaleki perekhozhie* were dependent for survival on alms. In the Soviet and post-Soviet periods lack of charity only features in visions emanating from pious Old Believer and Orthodox milieux, notably those of Klavdiia [Gubanov 2000:12] and Agniia [Pokrovskii 1997:40]. Elsewhere, however, lack of charity has faded from view. Today it is proving hard to reintroduce Russians to the concept of charity, which for decades was replaced by state responsibility for welfare; such attitudes have evidently also impacted on the countryside. Just one narrative refers to the meanness of a woman's father towards those in need [Lur'e, Tarabukina 1994:no. 4], while another even condemns begging [Lur'e, Tarabukina 1994:no. 2].

Scandal mongering (*kleveta*), as Fedotov indicates, is related to lack of charity because it offends against the Christian injunction to love thy neighbor [Fedotov 1935/1991:89]. He also observes that this is the only kind of lying condemned in the songs, just as it was deplored in visions of the afterlife in the Byzantino-Slavic Orthodox tradition. Spiritual songs and visions are alike in virtually ignoring the sin of lying. In the pre-Revolutionary period they also both highlighted scandal mongering, though in visions it is mainly a feature of those recorded from active churchgoers, monks or Old Believers who are closer to the written tradition [e.g. Vinogradov 1923:313; Nazidatel'nyi rasskaz 1915:5; Panteleimon 1996:44; Shevchenko 1999:28]. However, in



the modern period scandal mongering seems to have ceased to bother visionaries. It would be absurd to assume that the reason is that life in villages since 1917 has become more harmonious. If we take into consideration the paucity of reference to scandal mongering in lay visions from the pre-Revolutionary period, it would be more sensible to conclude that this is a traditional Orthodox sin not seen as a major problem among the laity. The theme of scandal mongering in *dukhovnye stikhi* and also in Fedotov's analysis of folk Orthodoxy would then appear to result from the singers' greater familiarity with the teachings of the Orthodox Church.

Apart from differences of emphasis, there are sins frequently mentioned in oral visions that do not appear in the religious verses. In modern *obmiraniia*, especially but not exclusively those recorded in Poles'e, visionaries observe the fate of sorcerers, in particular those who have caused cows to become dry or made a twist [*zalom*] in a plant to spoil the crops, [Tolstaia 1999:nos 4, 5, 7 and 8; Zinov'ev 1987:no. 437; Dobrovol'skaia 1999:no. 5; c.f. six examples in Bilyi 1930:79]. As a social sin, sorcery is akin to scandal mongering, since it is perceived as being based on envy or anger. Those phenomena attributed to sorcery, whether the economic importance of the fully functioning cow, some other misfortune, or the illness of persons, crops or animals can cause real distress. The genuine fear of being "spoiled" (hexed), which is still alive in Poles'e and elsewhere today, is understandable in the context of both the traditional worldview and the harshness of life in rural Russia. One may speculate on the reasons why sorcery does not appear in the *dukhovnye stikhi*. This may perhaps reflect the perception on the part of the *kaleki perekhozhie* that they were godly Christian folk; one of their songs suggests that Christ himself approved their profession. As such, they were protected by their lifestyle and their prayers from attack by sorcerers, and simply did not take the problem seriously. What is more, since they did not have families or possessions and relied on alms, they possessed nothing that could easily be "spoiled."

Suicide is also commonly mentioned in the *obmiranie*, albeit slightly less frequently than drunkenness [Pokrovskii 1997:40; Paunova 2002:194; Shevarenkova 1998:no. 157; Dobrovol'skaia 1999:no. 10]. Killing oneself has traditionally been regarded with particular horror by Orthodox believers; there is plenty of evidence to show how seriously Church and laity in imperial Russia regarded suicide [Paperno 1997]. Furthermore it also features among the most frequently mentioned sins in research carried out in Kargopol'e [Moroz 2000], though it is ranked after such sins as swearing or quarrelling. A. B. Moroz suggests that the reason for its high profile is that suicide is no longer a civil crime [Moroz 2000:202], but, while this fact may have contributed to its elevated ranking in the list of deadly sins, the strength of tradition should not be ignored. So deeply held were beliefs about suicide that its absence in the spiritual songs, and so in Fedotov's folk moral code, demonstrates very effectively the incompleteness of the picture. It is more than likely that the *kaleki perekhozhie*, had they been asked how they regarded suicide, would have expressed strong disapproval.

The relative unimportance of sexual sins in the Orthodox tradition (outside monastic culture), at least by comparison with the Catholic tradition, means that they are not a major theme in either the spiritual songs or contemporary visions, although they do feature more in pre-Revolutionary *obmiraniia*. Fedotov notes that the various references to breaches of moral purity are insufficient to argue for an ascetic moral law in folk

Orthodoxy, although there is room in hell for fornicators, adulterers and pimps according to the songs about the Last Judgement [Fedotov 1935/1991:89]. In *obmiraniia* from both the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries adultery and fornication are gendered sins, applying almost exclusively to women [Vinogradov 1923: 313; Panteleimon 1996:45, with an oral retelling in Lur'e, Tarabukina 1994:no. 2; Paunova 2002:194]. For example, a visionary from Vokhomskii region in Kostroma oblast' learned that women who run after other people's husbands will end up tied to a column of fire [Dobrovol'skaia 1999:no. 10]. The gendering of this theme fits conventional views about male and female sexual morality, which need not be discussed here. Only two pre-Revolutionary monastic *obmiraniia* condemn male sexual sins: masturbation and male infidelity [Nazidatel'nyi rasskaz 1915:6, 8], and sodomy [Panteleimon 1996:46; Nazidatel'nyi rasskaz 1915:6, 8]. Overall, however, it is not infidelity and fornication that are the most commonly mentioned sins against moral purity in the visionary tradition, but sexual relations between godparents, and between godparents and godchildren. This theme appears in pre-Revolutionary texts, both oral and those written, where the subject comes from an urban environment [Panteleimon 1996: 47; Vinogradov 1923: 313; Bilyi 1930: 80]. It accords with folk Orthodoxy as a whole, where, as Ol'ga Belova points out [2002: 173], the sexual transgressions of those whose relationship is not a blood one are viewed as being at least as serious as incest. The sins of godparents are not mentioned by Fedotov, and incest only in the context of those who cause the death of family members [Fedotov 1935/1991: 82]. The reason may well be that *kaleki perekhozhie* were not themselves family men.

The above is not an exhaustive survey of the sins mentioned in the *obmiranie*, but covers the commonest and most distinctive ones. It is clear that the ethical values of the *dukhovnye stikhi* and the *obmiranie* have much in common, but also differ in important ways. To be fair to Fedotov, he made it clear in *Stikhi dukhovnye* that the *kaleki perekhozhie* were a distinctive group, more knowledgeable about Orthodoxy than the average peasant. Although aware that these songs are not entirely typical of folk Orthodoxy (citing the image of Christ as a severe judge in the songs, as opposed to the loving intercessor of folk religious legend (*legenda*)), Fedotov does not pursue the differences much further [Fedotov 1935/1991: 123]. He admits that the singers' social ideals reflect their position as itinerant professionals surviving on alms, but restricts their significance to one ethical area: "The high value placed on begging and poverty is characteristic, of course, of the people as a whole and of Christianity in general, but the emphasis, particularly the loving treatment of this theme in the songs, is to be explained, perhaps, by the social origins of the singers" [Fedotov 1935/1991: 15].(13) As has been seen, charity is rarely mentioned nowadays by visionaries, further underlining the significance of social factors. Despite these caveats and the recognition that poetic licence may mean that the songs should not be taken as a completely accurate reflection of singers' views, he nonetheless regards the spiritual songs as "expressions of the deepest subconscious element in the religious soul of the Russian people," a somewhat Romantic view [Fedotov 1935/1991: 16, 123-24].

Reality is more complex, as the contributors to the volume on the concept of sin in Slavic and Jewish traditions have shown recently [Belova 2000]. Though some of the areas of moral concern shared by *dukhovnye stikhi* and visions are typical of folk Orthodoxy, each genre has its own focus. For example, folk religious

legends which include popular accounts of the Fall emphasize sins such as disobedience or incest [Belova 2002]. Particularly interesting in this respect is the analysis of the use of the word “sin” in data collected on expeditions to Kargopol’e, 1993-1999, by folklorists from the Russian State University for the Humanities, together with the results of a questionnaire asking villagers directly what for them constitutes a sin. Such a conclusion cannot pretend to be valid for Russia as a whole, or even exhaustive for Kargopol’e, but offers a corrective to the analysis of moral emphasis in both the spiritual songs and the *obmiranie* [Moroz 2000]. Examining the ways in which the word was used in everyday speech resulted in the following ranking of the deadliest sins in descending order of frequency: envy, swearing, scandal mongering, quarrelling, passing judgment, sexual license, abortion and suicide. The list does not entirely coincide with another compiled after informants had been asked directly to name the deadliest sins. Here in descending order of gravity we find cursing, quarrelling, lying, abortion, sexual license and suicide [Moroz 2000:20]. Ritual sins, which are prominent in the *obmiraniia* of the area, appear in a comprehensive list of sins, but do not have the same importance that they have in local visionary tradition, demonstrating yet again the difficulties of presenting a picture of folk religious ethics from any one source.

The ethical values embedded in the contemporary and pre-Revolutionary *obmiranie*, as in the spiritual songs, should not be seen as an authoritative expression of the ethical values of *narodnoe pravoslavie*. As a predominantly feminine genre, the *obmiranie* reflects the moral perspective of women rather than of men. Narratives about male visionaries (monks apart) have differences of emphasis that demonstrate this point: male visionaries tend to focus on their own fate [Strannik 1865, 1866], describe the punishments but not the reasons for them, or focus on the failings of friends and family [esp. Strannik 1862]. When men mention specific sins, it is sorcery in particular that they highlight [Wigzell 2003]. In any case, what values are omitted or deemphasized change not only according to gender, but also over time and place (in both geographic and social terms). Furthermore, most informants are elderly, often very elderly, and so are not necessarily representative of the moral worldview of the majority of Russian peasants today. What gives the *obmiranie* some additional authority is the fact that it directly reflects the experience of individuals and is therefore subject to considerable personal variation.<sup>(14)</sup> This is in contrast to Creation legends which are an inherited religious narrative with limited opportunities for an individual narrator’s own preferences. Fedotov’s essay is a superb evocation of the moral world of the *kaleki perekhozhie*, but its wider relevance is highly dubious. Question marks have to be raised over its applicability to popular Orthodoxy as a whole in the pre-Revolutionary period, and even more to Russian popular Orthodoxy today. A full picture of folk morality in Russia requires much more research. As Russian scholars begin at last to study folk and vernacular religion more widely, we may be able to form a more accurate understanding, at least of the contemporary situation

#### NOTES

1 My thanks to the Leverhulme Trust for their support in facilitating the research for this article.

- 2 *Dukhovnye stikhi* were also sung by Old Believers, as well as by some epic singers (many of whom were Old Believers), and in certain Orthodox villages. Fedotov based his conclusions on Bessonov's edition [Bessonov 1861-64/1970], choosing those songs that were, in his view, part of the repertoire of the blind singers. Whether he was always correct in his selection or not is irrelevant to the points being made in this essay.
- 3 Fedotov himself saw *Stikhi dukhovnye* as a preliminary to *The Russian Religious Mind* [Fedotov 1935/1991:156].
- 4 Although the otherworldly journey is the conventional conception of what happens in an *obmiranie*, other visions are possible, as, for example, in V. I. Dal's story "Obmiranie," where the subject sees his own house and his relatives.
- 5 It is clear from Bilyi's analysis of 69 Ukrainian *obmiranie* narratives [Bilyi 1930] that differences are minor. Local Russian traditions also vary; for example, in Kargopol'e in the north of Russia, social and ritual prohibitions are the commonest moral failings mentioned, while in Poles'e it is the practice of sorcery.
- 6 While oral texts are those recorded directly from an informant, written texts are of various kinds: a written record made by the visionary, a friend or relative, or a report by a local priest, and may have been recorded for private reading or for publication. Most oral narratives were recorded in the last thirty years, while written narratives are more common for the pre-Revolutionary period, where they appeared in religious journals or as pamphlets. I have included Vinogradov's texts from 1923 in the category of pre-Revolutionary *obmiraniia*. It should also be noted that a few "texts" are retellings by ethnographers and folklorists. I have not included the recent publication of a fictional *obmiranie* written in France by a Russian émigré [Voznesenskaia 2002].
- 7 Just occasionally in oral visions is it suggested that the severity of the punishment can be altered, whether by the actions of those on earth in praying for the dead, or in the case of an unbaptized child by getting a newborn infant to wear the dead child's cross [e.g. Cherednikova 2001:234; see also Wigzell 2002a]. The question of whether an unbaptized baby would inevitably go to Hell was a troubling one, and the motif of altering the fate of this category of sinners has precedents.
- 8 The instruction to return, often to repent of one's sins, is a traditional motif, found also in a number of written *obmiraniia* from the nineteenth century. So far, however, I know of only one earlier text, where it is the Mother of God who despatches a sinner back to earth. In the seventeenth-century "*Skazanie o chudesakh ot ikony Tikhvinskoi Bogomateri*" [Account of the miracles associated with the icon of the Tikhvin Mother of God], one tale recounts how a monk was sent back to this world by a voice saying that the Mother of God had interceded for him, and he was being returned to earth for several more years]. The MS from which this is taken is sob. Titova, no. 3373, l. 118 in the Russian National Library. My thanks are due to Dr A. Pigin of Petrozavodsk State University for this information.

- 9 Mothers are not always angels, at least in religious legends; witness the tale, recounted by Grushen'ka in Dostoevskii's Brothers Karamazov, of the mother who fails to be pulled out of hell by her son because she is too mean.
- 10 Bilyi [1930:68] notes in his survey of Ukrainian *obmiraniia* that visionaries may see parents, siblings, in-laws, children or acquaintances, but most commonly acquaintance and then parents. He does not, however, distinguish between reunions and images of torment, in which fellow villagers and other acquaintances, for obvious reasons, appear more often than relatives. Communication with dead relatives is characteristic of Russian oral oneiromantic tradition as a whole, as well as of folk beliefs surrounding death [Tolstaia 2001: 205-11]. Many of A. N. Redova's dreams, in which there are only glimpses of the visionary tradition, concern her meetings with her family and others she has known [Semenova 2000:II].
- 11 This was an extremely common motif in Ukraine according to Bilyi [1930: 80], who lists seven texts mentioning abortion, the majority contemporary with his study.
- 12 An exception is the male visionary from Sudogda region in Vladimir oblast', who learned his father's sins included non-attendance at church and not crossing himself [Dobrovol'skaia 1999: no. 6], or the woman from Iaroslavl' oblast' who criticized women who went to church without washing [Dobrovol'skaia 1999: no.5].
- 13 Translations of quotations from Fedotov's text are my own.
- 14 Of course it is not just possible, but even likely, that some narratives contain elements of fiction. Since the popular expectation is that anyone in a coma will have an experience of this kind, it may be assumed that those to whom it does not happen often fall back on the strategy of saying that they were forbidden to relate the details of their visit (a common motif). In Kargopol'e it is apparently a common assumption that those who come out of a coma have been forbidden to say anything at all about their experience (see the *obmiranie* texts in the Folklore Laboratory database). Alternatively, visionaries may be tempted by the fame and respect attendant upon the *obmiravshii/aia* to fulfil an audience's expectations with details drawn from their cultural stock. The absence of these among the Kargopol'e texts referred to above may indicate less familiarity with the visionary tradition.

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## REVIEWS

Caroline Humphrey. The Unmaking of Soviet Life: Everyday Economies After Socialism. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002. 265pp. Index, bibliography. Paperback. \$18.95. ISBN 0-8014-8773-0.

Anthropologists and folklorists ask different questions. As the field of folklore changes and moves further away from its early focus on oral literature, it is instructive to contrast our discipline with closely related ones, thus getting a better sense of what it means to be a folklorist. This collection of essays by a prominent anthropologist specializing in the economics of the post-Soviet world, especially Mongolia, is a good place to start. Humphrey writes well and the chapter on “Icebergs, Barter, and the Mafia” brought back vivid memories of scrounging for the necessities of life in Kyiv, all the while trying to arrange for transportation to villages so that I could get some fieldwork done. Humphrey categorizes the economic arrangements of the early post-Soviet days and explains them succinctly and clearly. In the next chapter, the author takes up the problem of exclusion, discussing how the collapse of the Soviet Union allowed the renegotiating of who was, and who was not, included in newly formed or reorganized collectives and the systems of protection and support that came with them. If a farm ceased being a kolkhoz, for example, and reconstituted itself as a cooperative, certain families that had previously been part of the group could be dispossessed. Humphrey constructs a model of those on the inside versus those on the outside and vividly describes the pitiful situation of those unfortunate enough to be excluded. Her model of inside/outside is accurate, but, as a folklorist, I felt there was a lack of attention to things predating the Soviet era and disregard for the long tradition of border protection and fear of strangers. Indeed, the Soviet Union epitomized boundary fears, surrounding itself with the Iron Curtain. But drastic inside/outside distinctions are not something that came into being with Soviet rule. Rather, they are a development of an old cultural imperative that can be seen in everything from vernacular architecture with its care to hide the entrance to the home, to greeting customs which go to great lengths to test visitors and to make sure they are acceptable, to legends that equate tall, dark and handsome strangers with the unquiet dead.

A folklorist would likely have a similar reaction to other chapters: while they are interesting, they present one perspective on the current situation, but they suffer from inattention to tradition and to folk belief. The chapter on consumer behavior in Moscow, for example, provides a useful and a detailed description of spending patterns. At the same time, it could profit from seeing that current gender roles evolve from traditional family structures; they are not something that began with Soviet social engineering. The inside/outside issue comes up a number of times. The chapter on consumerism states that Western goods are seen in some way as a sham and that people label them as such to control their own desire for that which is unattainable. A folklorist would likely add that Western products are devalued also because they come from outside and are thus viewed as contaminated. In subsequent chapters Humphrey looks at minorities who engage in trade, sometimes cross-border trade, and foreign capitalists, describing the problems that today’s merchants face. Again a folklorist

might add that discrimination against non-Russians stems from traditional wariness of strangers, not just from Soviet legacies. One chapter discusses economies outside the law, namely the society of thieves. It is very interesting, but disregards parallels to subaltern societies of the past, including such legal guilds as the church-affiliated societies of mendicants, the *kaleki* or *kaliki*.

The last section of the book contains two chapters that come close to being discussions of folk belief. “Avgai Khad, Theft and Social Trust in Post-Communist Mongolia” recounts a trip to a stone to which sacred power had come to be attributed and “Shamans in the City” describes modern day shamanic séances. While interesting, these chapters, too, might disappoint a folklorist. The chapter about the sacred stone concentrates on people’s fear of abandoning an economically valuable item, the car, in spite of threats to their lives from a severe snowstorm. It does not look for reasons why a stone might come to be considered holy nor does it examine the history of homage to sacred places and objects. The shamanism chapter treats the phenomenon in its urban, New Age manifestation, rather than giving the reader the religious history of this belief system. What I found most unsettling about this book is that, by ignoring tradition, it created the appearance that almost everything we observe today is a direct result of Soviet rule. This ascribes much more power to Soviet culture than is warranted and leaves Western readers with an incomplete picture of the countries that came into being with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

While folklorists might find aspects of Humphrey’s book frustrating, they will benefit from seeing the perspective of another discipline. Humphrey describes contemporary phenomena with sensitivity and skill. She should be given credit for describing rural life in addition to the situation in cities. The Soviet Union left a legacy of restricting foreigners to urban areas and too many western scholars have made little attempt to shake free of this legacy and look at the lives of the many people living outside the urban centers. Humphrey looks at both Russia and Mongolia, rare in such works.

While a folklorist might long for Humphrey to apply her talents to an examination of the pre-Soviet and traditional component of the phenomena she describes, we must admit that no one person can do everything. Furthermore, I could argue that, by focusing exclusively on the present, Humphrey provides a needed balance to folklorists in the post-Soviet world. Certainly in Ukraine where I work and amongst the Russian folklorists whom I know, attention to the past can often be excessive. Their desire to recover traditions that existed prior to Soviet attempts at social engineering is understandable. For many, Soviet rule was oppressive and thus they are determined to uncover that which preceded the Soviet era and is unblemished by it. At the same time, their insistence on interviewing only the oldest village residents, on getting them to describe only their earliest experiences, means that they are overlooking the enormously interesting processes at work today where people are trying to establish a new, post-Soviet identity by blending traditional and newly allowed religious elements with those Soviet practices that they still find meaningful. Humphrey may not look at the traditional elements in the cultures of the post-Soviet states, but she does give an astute description of the current situation. If we combine this with the attention that Russian, Ukrainian, and, presumably, Mongolian folklorists are lavishing on the past, we can get a complete picture. It can be our job as folklorists to take the work of anthropologists like

Humphrey and to point out those elements that are traditional, tracing how tradition was used and modified in Soviet times and how it is realized now. Anthropologists, economic anthropologists included, should learn from and use the work of folklorists. For example, folk belief, as articulated in legends about Sten'ka Razin, holds that the accumulation of wealth leads to damnation. Briefly stated, keeping anything for one's self, as Sten'ka Razin did with that money which he did not give to the poor, turns the person, upon his death, into a *klad* (treasure) spirit, doomed to guard the money until another person is greedy and foolish enough to take it. In folklore, these powerful anti-capitalism stories have given birth to new legends about curses attached to wealth. It would be most useful for anthropologists to be aware of this tradition. They would then investigate the issue of antipathy toward wealth and they could tell us how it plays out in everyday economies.

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Russian Folk Traditions. Institute of Russian Literature (Pushkinskii Dom) and Norman Ross: 2000. Sixteen CD set. \$420

Russian Folk Traditions is the second of two compact disc sets released in the United States by Norman Ross Publishing (available for order on their web site at <http://www.nross.com/cart/pd02.html>). The first, Non-Russian Folk Traditions (ten titles on twelve discs), features recordings of folk music from the peoples of Central Asia, the Caucasus and Siberia. Russian Folk Traditions consists of fifteen titles on sixteen discs of material culled from the phonogram archives of the Institute of Russian Literature (Pushkinskii Dom, Russian Academy of Sciences) in Saint Petersburg. The discs are entitled: Russian Epics; Ballads; Historical Songs; Spiritual Poetry; Lamentations of the Russian North; Wedding Songs and Incantations; Pagan Calendar Songs; Lyrical Songs; Recruit and Soldiers' Songs; Fairy Tales; Limericks (*chastushki*); Children's Folklore (including Lullabies); Incantations; Instrumental Music; Song Traditions of the Russian Dukhobors (two discs). Each disc features a playlist (in Russian) that includes the title and running time of each piece; the name of the performer; the date and location (republic, province [*oblast'*], region [*raion*] and/or village) of the recording; and the name of the recorder.

The strength of this set is the sound quality of each and every recording. Those of us who have struggled to decipher tapes of poor-quality vinyl records reproducing even poorer-quality recordings will reap great benefits from this set. Digital re-mastering has rendered all the material, even that taped in the early years of the twentieth century, clear and audible. These recordings make it much more likely that Russian folk music will engage students, since the sound quality allows the beauty of the folk material to shine.

While I welcomed owning this music and used it in my Russian Folklore class, overall I find that this set suffers from a significant number of limitations. The first problem is minor and could easily be corrected; in some cases the playlists are incorrect, which renders the information provided useless. This is particularly noticeable on the Russian Epics disc, where, for example, a purported twenty-minute track runs for only nine minutes, and the playlist states that there are eight epic tracks, while there are in fact twelve. A more serious lapse from the point of view of specialists is that the publisher does not include invaluable ethnographic information about the recordings. I was left to wonder whether the songs were still sung actively at the time of the recording or whether they were memories of past celebrations that had died out. In addition, whether these songs represent current practice or past performance, establishing who performed a song, to whom and at what point in a ritual is necessary to comprehend its significance. It is also unclear why these particular songs or prose recordings were chosen. Those who are not specialists in Russian ethnomusicology or folk music cannot determine whether they might represent a particularly fine example of the genre or might be distinctive in form, style or melody. What is most vexing about this lack of information is that all the expertise and information necessary to make this set a valuable scholarly tool is certainly available from the personnel and archives in Pushkinskii Dom. Since none of this information is provided, it is impossible to use these songs as an effective

teaching or research tool. We can only hope that the publisher chooses to rectify these lapses in any future endeavors into folk music and in later releases of this set.

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Vladimir S. Kliaus. Traditsionnaia kul'tura starobriadtsev (semeiskikh) Zabaikal'ia. CD-Rom. Required System: Pentium PC 233 MHz, 64 Meg RAM, 48x CD-ROM, Windows 98, Internet Explorer 5.5. Flash Player and Flash Active X are provided on the CD. Images, audio, video, a searchable full-text bibliography of 500 titles. 2001. \$32.00.

Compact disks are capable of holding an enormous amount of information and have the advantage of presenting data in a variety of formats. Thus, the same CD can hold text, sound files, video and still images. Kliaus and his collaborators have utilized the capacity of digital technology to give us a treasure trove of Old Believer data on one CD.

The CD under review has a short introductory essay. It also contains a terrific bibliography that is divided into useful categories such as the history of Old Believer settlements, dialect studies, collections of folklore data, including children's folklore, calendary and life cycle rituals, and collections of prose, song and incantation texts. There are lists of studies that focus on material culture and studies that deal with Old Believer farming techniques. Literary works that mention Old Believers are referenced, as are archives with repositories of Old Believer materials. The bibliography goes beyond published and archival works to include lists of available audio and video recordings, Old Believer web sites and Old Believer organizations. I am not an Old Believer specialist, but the bibliography seems marvelously complete. Furthermore, in addition to giving citations, the bibliography allows the user to click on selected shorter pieces, usually articles, to view the full text. According to the introduction, the provided articles are the ones that are hardest to find. Thus the bibliography of this CD either directs the user to the source of a particular item or, in those cases where location is difficult, provides the item itself. Finally, the CD has a Yandex search engine. With a Russian keyboard installed, words can be typed, or pasted, into the search page where Boolean searches can be performed in any one of thirty different categories. The search engine works beautifully, searching all of the text files, bibliographic citations, folklore texts and article texts on the entire CD. This allows not only location of desired studies or texts; it allows actual research on the CD itself. A scholar can type in a word or a phrase and see in which types of folklore texts it appears, and in which contexts.

The CD goes well beyond providing an excellent bibliography and search engine. There are collections of photographs for twenty-two Old Believer villages and a set of photos of icons. The sets of photographs contain both recent ones made by Kliaus and his colleagues on their expeditions to the Zabaikal region and copies of old photos. There are also fourteen sets of audio files from twelve villages and twenty-three short video clips. The audio files offer a variety of genres. Songs of various types are included and there are examples of prose texts such as tales and legends. Some of these are transcribed; most are not. Again, most are new recordings, but digitized versions of songs collected in the past are also included. The short video clips show several types of healing rituals, baptisms, commemorations of the dead, and private and public prayers. A selection of song and prose texts from published sources is included.

The Old Believer CD may contain a vast quantity of information but it does have problems, both technical and scholarly. For example, some materials are thoroughly documented and others are documented poorly. The problem is most acute with the photographs. We are told in which village they were taken, but often that is all of the information given. Thus, we do not know who the people in the photographs are or what is important about them. Are we supposed to notice their dress? Are they the performers who are the sources of the songs or narratives in the audio files? Are they performing a ritual? I did notice the costumes and the ritual acts, but there may well be other things that I overlooked.

Some of the old photographs that have been digitized for this CD do have captions, but the resolution is often so bad that the captions are virtually illegible. In addition, the resolution of number of the new photographs, the ones taken by Kliaus and his team, is quite poor. It seems that the members of the expedition learned to use their digital camera over time and the quality of some of the photos is good; however, most of the photos have huge pixels and thus are blurry. The reflection off the icons often obscures the icon itself. The copies of black and white photos have not been put through a filter to remove the frequent moiré effect.

Similar problems appear elsewhere. The lighting on a number of videos is bad and this makes it hard to see what is going on. The videos are extremely short and, in addition to the many technical problems, one questions the editing of the clips. Were these really the most important actions? Should not a woman's discussion of her aches and pains be cut so that we could see more of the wax ceremony she is doing? Or is her complaint about her own problems relevant to an understanding of her as a folk healer?

Probably the worst in terms of technical problems is the audio files section, in which one is supposed to click on the village in which the recordings were made. A page then opens with a picture of the medium in which the recording originally appeared: a record, a CD, or a set of earphones, presumably meaning that the recording was on a tape or an audiocassette. The user then has to run the cursor over the record or CD or earphones and a list of song titles should appear. I say "should" because this does not always happen. The cursor has to be dragged in a particular direction and that direction only and, sometimes, before the user has a chance to drag the cursor as far as the desired song title, all titles disappear and the process must begin anew. In the case of one set of sound files, I never managed to get the song titles to come up at all. Once the sound files are opened, they are quite good. The source is always given. If it is an existing recording, there is full bibliographic information. If it is a new recording made by Kliaus and his team, we get the name of the performer or performers and a picture, the date of collection, and the name of the collector. For a number of songs, there is a transcript of the song, story or other audio recording. In short, if you can get the sound files to open, they are excellent and the selection is good, so that there are samples of all basic oral genres.

The next technical issue is one of venue. The cute pictures of phonograph records, CD's and earphones, as well as many of the other features of this disk, are done in Flash, which is a quirky program that makes this CD unusable in the classroom. Having discovered that there were good genre samples on this disk, I wanted to play them for my students. This proved impossible because, while I could use the CD at home, the equipment in classrooms could not handle it and it routinely crashed. The same proved true with the videos: I could watch



them at home, but not show them to my students unless I copied them over to another CD at home and played the videos off my own disk.

Somewhere between the problem of documentation and technical difficulties is the lack of directions on how to use the CD. When the user puts this disk into the computer, it loads automatically. What comes up is a map with some production credits and directions for exiting the CD; there are no directions for opening it. Because I am familiar with a variety of digital conventions, I soon understood that I was to click on the part of the map that showed the region where Old Believers live. I am not so sure that someone with less familiarity with digital technologies would know where to begin. Similar problems appear all the way through. I discovered the library only recently and more or less by accident. There are no directions to guide the user, who must then randomly click on objects to see what, if anything, happens.

With all of the technical difficulties this CD presents, I am still very glad I own it. Even though I do not teach Old Believer folklore, the healing practices of this group are similar enough to mainstream Russian practices for me to use the video clips in class. The same applies to the sound files. As already noted, the various materials are not easy to use and need to be copied to make them run smoothly. But having illustrative material of this sort adds so much to a course that it is worth the effort. I am grateful for the photos, bad quality images included. Even though they are too fuzzy to use in class, they are interesting as comparative material for my own research.

I should also add that, as someone who does fieldwork, I am most sympathetic to Kliaus and his team. In the countryside, lighting is not always good, the electricity may be switched off and batteries impossible to find. Does that mean it is not worth photographing a ritual practice? I would say one does the best one can; data, no matter how marginal, is infinitely preferable to no data at all. I also work with digital technologies and, again, Kliaus and his team have my sympathies. When working with digital formats, one tries to anticipate where users will look, what they will click on, how they will proceed through the assembled data. My team and I are always looking for feedback so that we can improve our work. I hope that this review will help Kliaus and his team produce an even better CD in the near future.

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