

Буйських, Юлія. *Колись русалки по землі ходили: Жіночі образи української міфології*. [Buyskykh, Julia. *Once Upon a Time the Water Nymphs Walked the Earth: Female Images in Ukrainian Mythology*]. Харків: Клуб сімейного дозвілля, 2018. Notes. Bibliography. Index. 320 pp. 123 hr. [\$4.50] (hardcover). ISBN 978-617-12-5113-7.

In Ukraine, there is growing interest in the distant past. It is rooted in late Soviet and early post-Soviet identity crises and their corresponding revivalist initiatives. Many believe that traditional village culture sheds light on the ancestral ways of life and provides a key to understanding Old Slavic mythology. In the spheres of education, literature, politics, media, and business, as well as in new religious movements such as neo-Paganism, people are referencing numerous symbols and narratives that present contemporary interpretations of the past. These popular initiatives have pushed academic studies of folklore to the margins. Instead, what Iuliia Buyskykh calls “quasi-scholarship” on folk tradition dominates the shelves of bookstores in Ukraine. Buyskykh’s monograph *Колись русалки по землі ходили: Жіночі образи української міфології* [Once Upon a Time the Water Nymphs Walked the Earth: Female Images in Ukrainian Mythology] is a response to these trends. In agreement with other Ukrainian scholars, the author finds that, under the umbrella of ancestral wisdom, certain adaptations and interpretations of traditional folklore serve manipulative, and often detrimental, political agendas.

Even though it is based on parts of Buyskykh’s candidacy dissertation [*kandydats’ka dysertatsiia*], the primary goal of the monograph is not to make an innovative contribution to scholarship. Instead, it is written in the spirit of applied folkloristics and anthropology, aiming to educate a broader readership. In order to do this, the author adjusts her prose, avoiding the complex academic jargon that is especially characteristic for Eastern European scholarly literature. It is in this approach that the main strength of the monograph lies, especially considering that such applied studies are only beginning to emerge in Ukraine, and Buyskykh is one of a few pioneers in the area.

The author accomplishes three tasks. First, she sheds light on some of the most well known recent mythological constructs by unveiling both methodological gaps and the political biases behind them. Secondly, she extensively outlines differences between academic and popular sources in order to show how lived reality described and conceptualized by professional ethnographers differs from ideologically-biased interpretations. Thirdly, Buyskykh invites the reader into the world of “lived religion” and spirituality in present-day Ukraine, showing how ethnographic methods help to understand complex cultural formations, including mythic imagination, as experienced and interpreted by insiders rather than outside ideologists. This part is based on the author’s own fieldwork among middle-aged and elderly women in the villages of Ukraine.

The book consists of four chapters. In Chapter 1, “*Між етнографічною дійсністю та кабінетним*” [Between ethnographic reality and office fiction],

Buyskykh provides contextual background for her study. Berehynia, one the most controversial phenomena, widely perceived as an ancient goddess, constitutes one of the main foci. Considering that the book is meant for a readership in Ukraine where Berehynia is very well known, the author only briefly focuses on contemporary ideological interpretations surrounding this entity. For example, she refers to the works of Ukrainian feminist historian and ethnologist Oksana Kis, who illustrates how Berehynia became a political tool that indoctrinates women into patriarchal ideology under the overall nationalist paradigm of thinking. Berehynia conveys a historically inaccurate idea that the distant ancestors of present-day Ukrainians were governed by matriarchy. However, the very notion of matriarchal power is linked to ideals of domesticity and motherhood (22).

Among “quasi-scholarly” sources devoted to Berehynia, Buyskykh cites writer Serhii Plachynda, who, while positioning his interpretations as scholarly, wrongfully views Berehynia as an ancient sign of protection that eventually transformed into the trident [*tryzub*], the national symbol of present-day Ukraine. Buyskykh sees some more radical interpretations as catastrophic, such as those of writer and artist Valerii Voitovych who positions himself as a researcher of Ukrainian mythology, and whose works are often published as scholarly (25). Voitovych places Berehynia in the context of Ukrainian mythology whose richness, in his opinion, indicates that “Ukrainians constitute a core of the oldest white race on Earth...” (26).

Buyskykh does not analyze these views, but instead, debunks them. Drawing on numerous ethnographic and archival sources, she traces the historical trajectory of Berehynia to show its recent arm-chair origins. The concept owes its popularity to two 20-th century Ukrainian writers, Vasyl Skurativs’kyi and Vasyl Ruban. This invented symbol is a product of what Buyskykh calls “office mythology,” nourished, in turn, by the now infamous concept of “dual faith” [*dvovir’ia*]. The author ends this chapter with the introduction of “lived religion” and related ethnographic methodologies.

Chapter 2 is devoted to a diachronic overview of scholarly literature dealing with the study of mythic imagination in various areas of present-day Ukraine. The author further develops this theme in Chapter 3 entitled “*Жіночі постаті української нижчої міфології*” [Female images in Ukrainian lower mythology]. Here, Buyskykh utilizes previous scholarship to identify female beings, describing their functions in traditional folklore. Scholars may see little, if any necessity, in these two chapters, where the author does not offer new insights but, rather, summarizes what is known. However, the chapters are justified considering that Buyskykh’s main goal is to educate a broader readership that often prefers “quasi-scholarship” over academic literature. Here, the reader receives a glimpse into the world of traditional mythology that portrays documented ethnographic realities rather than office-based contemporary interpretations. In her concluding remarks to this chapter, the author emphasizes that traditional worldviews are dynamic and complex, and can only be understood in relationship to multiple socio-cultural spheres of daily life. Referring to the classical anthropological

studies by Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz, she briefly focuses on the role and mission of an anthropologist in understanding and explaining these complexities.

This discussion leads the author to her final chapter “*Що ж я тобі розкажу, я жила собі й жила, всякого виділа...’: усні тексти, етика запису та публікації*” [What can I tell you? I’ve just lived a life and have witnessed all sorts of things: oral texts, the ethics of recording and publication]. In this chapter, Buiskykh further expands on the principles of fieldwork with a particular focus on ethical aspects, an important issue for Ukraine, where a code of ethics in ethnographic research is not yet established. She stresses that ethnographers should not overstep boundaries that would turn their work into a form of inquisition that, in turn, could potentially cause harm to their research participants. She further lets her own consultants speak for themselves, extensively citing personal experience narratives about female mythical beings introduced in previous chapters. These texts are meant as examples of ethnographic reality in contrast to “office mythology.”

Some parts of the book would benefit from a more extensive analysis. The author’s overview of ethnographic literature is largely uncritical. Certain scholarly concepts she cites represent particular trends and schools of thought and can be viewed as biased. One is the concept of “lower mythology” used recurrently throughout the text. “Lower mythology” is an outside label that implies a hierarchical division of culture and does not represent an insider’s perspective.

Nonetheless, the author convincingly presents her views as both researcher and activist. Buiskykh’s work is not a contribution to knowledge in a conventional sense, at least not in line with the expectations of Western scholarship. Its contribution is, rather, broadly educational in the context of present-day Ukraine. The author shows that “office mythology,” whose creators often self-identify as scholars and attempt to justify their views by referring to traditional folklore, is indeed far removed from lived traditions. With the help of accessible and engaging prose, she introduces a balanced scholarly voice into a broader segment of Ukrainian society where it had been nearly non-existent before. This book will be of interest not only to Ukrainians but also to readers of Ukrainian who are interested in wider Slavic and East European post-Socialist cultural dynamics.

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