

REVIEWS

Kononenko, Natalie O. *Ukrainian Ritual on the Prairies: Growing a Ukrainian Canadian Identity*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2023.

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Natalie Kononenko's latest book, *Ukrainian Ritual on the Prairies: Growing a Ukrainian Canadian Identity*, is an important addition to the existing body of literature on Ukrainian folklore in general and on Ukrainian diaspora studies in particular. It offers a fresh view of the Ukrainian diaspora in the Canadian Prairies through the lens of the rituals—both private and those that take place in family and public community events. The book stems both from the author's decade-long involvement in the Sanctuary Project, in which she and her colleagues documented Ukrainian churches in parts of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and British Columbia, and from her life-long role as an ethnographer. The author positions herself in the book as a "hyphenated Ukrainian" (4) with a rich experience of doing fieldwork in Ukraine, which also provides her with useful insights.

An important highlight of the book is the term "vernacular nationalism" (4) that Kononenko coins, inspired by Leonard Primiano's idea of "vernacular religion" from his 1995 article "Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife." She acknowledges that in different contexts, both personal and political, nationalism can be both a good and bad thing. Realizing the predominantly negative connotations that nationalism has gained in Western academia, Kononenko emphasizes that there are different types of nationalism. She delineates three types of Ukrainian nationalist ideologies: 1) "the nationalism of Ukrainians living in the country itself who are seeking to define and promote Ukrainian identity," 2) "the nationalism of Ukrainians living abroad, who sought to safeguard what they viewed as a pure Ukrainian culture for export back into Ukraine once the country was free," and 3) nationalism that is "focused on Canada rather than Ukraine and one that looks to life in the present rather than trying to preserve or resurrect the culture of the past... nationalism without dogma"—that is, vernacular nationalism (10-11). Later she goes on to demonstrate concrete cases when, in her opinion, vernacular nationalism is embodied in the ritual practices of Ukrainian Canadians living on the Prairies.

For example, in Chapter Three on "Vernacular Religion," the author discusses how, because of the harsh weather conditions, parishes along with priests often had to introduce modifications to certain rituals, like the blessing of the water outside at Yordan in the freezing temperatures of January or even blessing Easter baskets outside. Such decisions, she claims, involve "flexibility on the part of the church hierarchy [that] encouraged Prairie Ukrainian-Canadians to accept flexibility in other spheres of their lives" and "allowed them to develop a concept of Ukrainian identity that is not rigid and does not follow the dictates of any official body" (62). In Chapter Four, "Ukrainian Wedding on the Prairies,"

Kononenko also describes modifications and adaptations of traditional Ukrainian rituals, like introducing the wedding fruitcake or even a fake cake made out of Styrofoam (104) alongside the *korovai*—a traditional Ukrainian wedding bread—or a bride’s white wedding dress instead of Ukrainian traditional clothes that were “much maligned by Anglo-Canadians, who saw it as another marker of the uncivilized, even brutish, nature of Ukrainian immigrants” (118). Kononenko explains that these decisions were not dictated by an attempt to assimilate. On the contrary, such changes demonstrate the construction of a unique Ukrainian Canadian identity, in which both aspects of these identities are present but also allow for a new identity to emerge: “Ukrainian immigrants did treasure their Ukrainian identity, but they were also Canadian, and at the wedding they were performing a ritual that would ground them in Canadian life” (114).

Funeral and death rituals also reflect intercultural connections, “a link between people and the new land in which they buried their deceased... It was a way to plant ‘seeds’ from which new identities and new possibilities might grow” (149). It is not unusual for older people to prepare traditional Ukrainian outfits, including those brought from or made in Ukraine, for their interment. Kononenko speculates that this might be “a way to ‘go back’ to the original Ukrainian home in spirit, if not in fact” after death (154).

For her project, Kononenko mostly interviewed the descendants of the so-called “second wave” of Ukrainian immigrants to North America that happened during the interwar period, who were predominantly farmers, as opposed to the third wave of political immigrants or exiles after WWII, consisting mostly of educated intelligentsia. Thus, she favors primarily what we might call rural nationalism, following the distinction between rural and urban nationalisms introduced by folklorist Ray Cashman in his essay “Visions of Irish Nationalism” (2008).

In addition to its significance in enriching the fields of folklore, Ukrainian studies, Slavic studies, and diaspora studies, Kononenko’s *Ukrainian Ritual on the Prairies* enters the realm of scholarly conversations on nationalism. The idea of vernacular nationalism is so central here that I wish it were reflected in the book title. While the scholarship on nationalism is dominated by historians, political scientists, and literary scholars, the view of a folklorist is a much-needed contribution to existing discourse.

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