

Russian Summer Folk Rituals Yesterday and Today:
 Eroticism, the Cult of Ancestors, and the Soviet System
 Yelena V. Minyonok and Sergey A. Minyonok

In Russia, the two month period from the end of spring until the middle of summer is traditionally characterized by the observance of several holidays. These holidays include: Ascension Day (the sixth Thursday after Orthodox Easter), *Semik* (the seventh Thursday after Easter), Trinity Sunday (the seventh Sunday after Orthodox Easter), St. John the Baptist Day (July 7), and the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul (July 12). With the Day of Saints Peter and Paul, the holiday season comes to a close and the period of fasting begins.

Each of the holidays listed above is observed over the course of several days rather than just one. The various summer festivals are understood more as mini-seasons, their duration depending on local tradition. Thus, in certain areas, the ten days between Ascension Day and Trinity Sunday are considered the festival season. In other areas, it is the period between Trinity Sunday and the Day of St. John the Baptist. In still other areas, the holiday season covers the time from Trinity Sunday to the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul. Whatever the holiday season, ritual activities on its first and last days serve the function of demarcation, separating holiday from normal time. Typical demarcation acts include tying tree branches into wreaths at the beginning of the ritual period and destroying them at the end.

Whatever form the rituals took in a particular area, they were all clearly tied to summer: all celebrated the blossoming of nature in general and rye in particular, the grain that was the main food product of the Slavs for centuries and thus central to their economy. All of the summer calendary festivals had a common ritual structure which preserves many archaic, pre-Christian features. This structure was characterized by women making a ritual object out of vegetation at the beginning of the festive period and their destruction of the same object at its end. Destruction took the form of drowning the ritual object, burying it, burning it, tearing it to pieces, leaving it in a tree or in the cemetery, or symbolically slaughtering the object. The object itself could be a ritual doll, a decorated tree, usually a birch, or a real woman dressed in leaves and branches. The ritual object was the semantic center of the summer rite: all emotions were directed toward it and people communicated with it as if it were a living being, dancing with it, performing songs for it, and so forth.

It is important to point out that vegetation in general, be it trees, branches, grass, herbs, or flowers, is central to all summer rites. Thus, people insert tree branches in the graves of their relatives on Trinity Sunday. On *Semik*, ritual wreaths and dolls are made from grasses, branches and even entire trees. During the week preceding Trinity Sunday, people decorate doors and windows, that is the openings into

the house, with birch branches. All of the acts involving vegetation are said to offer magical protection against witches and sometimes against forest nymphs or *rusalki*. All of the ritual vegetation listed immediately above, like the central ritual object discussed in the preceding paragraph, must be destroyed at the end of the holiday period. The usual methods of destruction include burning, feeding the vegetation to cattle, throwing the branches and other greenery on the roof, drowning them, and so forth.

The various summer rituals take place around the time of the summer solstice. This is a time of crisis and transition. The sun reaching its apex and beginning its descent marks the crossing of a boundary and, when boundaries in the natural cycle are broken, all boundaries are believed to disappear for a while. Thus, the boundary between the world of the living and the world of the dead is breached during the summer holiday period. This explains why people believe that forest nymphs can be encountered during the summer holidays. It also explains why deceased relatives are welcomed into the houses of the living at this time. Because this is a time of transition, witches are believed to take advantage of it and to roll in the dew right at dawn, gathering the energy of the blossoming rye and all of the other flowers. This particularly potent energy will serve them in good stead for the practice of their craft in the upcoming year.

A number of prohibitions characterize the summer holiday period: pregnant women are not supposed to sew, knit, or use scissors. According to folk belief, only the physical body of the baby is inside the mother's womb during pregnancy; the spiritual essence of the baby belongs to the world of the dead until birth. Thus, when the dead return to the world during the summer holidays, a baby might come with them also. It might hover close to its mother-to-be, only to be wounded by her sewing implements: the sharp scissors or the point of a needle. Similarly, fathers-to-be should not chop or saw wood or use any sharp tools during the summer holidays.

The function of summer rituals is to open the border between worlds for a short period of time and then to seal it tightly once again. The essential structure of the ritual mentioned earlier frames this function. Thus, to make a ritual doll or to decorate a tree serves to mark the beginning of the ritual period and to open the border between worlds. The destruction of the ritual doll or tree at the end of the holiday serves to close off all access to the other world. It should be noted that, no matter how full of pre-Christian elements the summer holidays may be, they nevertheless coincide with Christian holy days (Trinity Sunday, the Day of St. John the Baptist, the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul). Nonetheless, there is minimal Christian influence on the essence of the summer celebrations. To help us understand the dynamics of these rituals as they have been performed during the course of the twentieth century, let us look at their performers.

Who are the current performers of these essentially pre-Christian rites? They are mostly women in their sixties and seventies. Most were born in the period from the late 1920's to the late 1930's, that is

during the period when collective farms were introduced. Let us look at this period and examine what the introduction of collectivization meant to the Russian village. For one thing, it meant an effort on the part of the Soviet government to totally change the country's agricultural policy. Collectivization was meant to eliminate privately owned farm land. Prior to collectivization, Soviet officials took away the grain grown on the state owned lands and paid the peasants nothing, or next to nothing, for this harvest. Nonetheless, each peasant still owned his private plot and could use this for support. With collectivization, private plots were to be eliminated. This was so bold and cataclysmic a step that it took the Soviet government some twelve to thirteen years from the time of the Soviet Socialism Revolution to gather the courage for such a move.

But why make such a move in the first place? The peasants had supported the October Revolution because Bolshevik leaders had promised them land. This was a promise that was indeed fulfilled and, immediately after the Revolution, land was divided quite equitably among the peasants. At that time, the Communist leadership felt that this measure would eliminate social inequality once and for all: every household would own its own land and all would prosper. Reality was not so kind. About ten years after the initial reallocation of land, poverty began to resurface in the Russian village. The dynamics behind this phenomenon are easy to understand. If one family had seven sons, worked hard and remained sober, ten years of land ownership lead to prosperity, if not riches. If the sons married women from similarly prosperous families and received good dowries, they did better still, were able to build their own houses and perhaps hire workers to further expand their land holdings. At the same time, a widow with no sons and three under-age daughters could find herself in dire straits indeed. To feed herself and her children, she would have hire herself out to a rich neighbor, perhaps being forced into selling her land in the bargain. Even a family with sons but with a household head given to drinking might not prosper and end up selling land. Thus, it did not take long for social strata to reappear in the village. Collectivization, then, was meant to counteract stratification by eliminating private ownership and transferring all land to joint ownership by peasants who would now be members of the collective farm.

At the beginning, collectivization was voluntary. It was the path chosen by the poorest members of the rural community who understood that working on a collective farm would reduce personal responsibility and demand less energy than running a private plot. Freedom from responsibility tempted not only the poorest, but the young. In a traditional peasant household, the younger generation was under the strict control of their elders and was denied the freedom of a personal income. Everything that young people earned went into a common family budget controlled by the eldest family members. Thus, for young people, joining a collective farm meant escaping from under the tyranny of their elders. It meant a personal income of some money, some grain, some goods. Perhaps it was the escape from traditional

family structure that encouraged abandonment of other traditional forms, namely traditional rituals.

During the first years of collectivization, a small number of peasants willing gave up their private plots and joined collective farms. They were usually the poorest families or the youngest members of large extended families because, for both of these groups, working on a collective farm presented the more attractive alternative. But voluntary collectivization did not last for long. Collective farms did sell grain to the state at a low price, but private farms did not, letting the rules of the free market determine asking price. As a result, the cities started to experience a shortage of foodstuffs and, toward the end of the 1920's, the Soviet government began repressive measures against private land owners. The most prosperous of them were branded "kulaks" and were shot or exiled to Siberia. This intimidation, along with other actions, left middle income peasants, the majority of rural dwellers, no choice but to join collective farms, bringing their land and their cattle with them. Basically, if they did not join collective farms voluntarily, their land and their cattle would be forcibly confiscated.

A policy of enlarging villages was implemented at about the same time. Prior to the Revolution, very small villages consisting of only two to three families were not uncommon. The families themselves were quite large, often as many as ten children per couple. Nonetheless, a village could consist of as little as several households. All families in these small villages were forced to join large villages and to move to a new domicile. If they refused, a local Communist would come and destroy the chimney of their home. For a peasant, a house without a chimney was a house without a stove and this made survival through the long Russian winter impossible. Furthermore, a stove had important psychological associations: it was the center of peasant life, the place for cooking, sleeping, for performing magic and curative acts. One after another, peasant families joined collective farms and, by the early 1930's, all of Russian was collectivized.

The first years of collectivization were an economic success but dealt a serious blow to folklore traditions. The drastic changes in the rhythms of everyday life could not have had a different effect. Private farms were abolished and the establishment of a seven-day work week meant the disappearance of the division of time between working days and holidays. Peasants had neither the time nor the energy to maintain their folk traditions. More important, there was no opportunity to transmit folklore to the next generation. Also, religious activity was open to old people only. It was only this group that was considered beyond re-education and thus allowed to perform anything that might be considered a religious act. Furthermore, most churches were blown up. Even though summer holidays were essentially pre-Christian in character, they were nevertheless celebrated under the names of Russian Orthodox Christian saints. Finally, the old structure of the peasant family was destroyed. Gender distinctions disappeared. During the period of private ownership, men did most of the work in the fields. They plowed, sowed, reaped. During the winter, they went to cities to make money as construction workers, carpenters, tailors,

and so forth. Women helped men reaped, but otherwise did not work in fields. Their main activities were behind the walls of the house and the fence of the yard where they took care of the housework, made clothing, raised children, and tended the livestock. Collectivization disrupted work rhythms. Women continued to milk cows but, instead of milking their own several animals, they milked twenty to thirty cows on the collective farm and, instead of milking for a limited amount of time, they milked all day. Women were encouraged to take jobs previously considered to lie in the male domain. Urged on by Communist slogans proclaiming gender equality and supported by Communist leaders, they became tractors drivers and combine operators. Women left the confines of the home and, while they may have derived benefits from gender equality, their contact with their children became limited, thus reducing their opportunities to teach these children the songs, stories, and other lore they had learned from their own mothers. In essence, the mechanism for the transmission of folklore knowledge was destroyed.

The break in folklore traditions that came with collectivization can be readily detected today. Performers who were born prior to 1930 exhibit a complex singing technique with specialized folksong phonetics, as was characteristic of the performers of summer holiday rituals in the distant past. Singers born after 1930 perform their ritual songs using the same phonetics as in everyday speech. Interestingly, while there has been a major shift in song performance style, summer holiday rites did survive collectivization. This can be explained in a number of ways. Folklore is remarkably tenacious and the leaders of collective farms, those responsible for introducing new ways, were themselves peasants. Thus, though they may have been committed to collectivization and fostering the ideals of Communism, they were still under the sway of the power and fascination of folklore. In folklore, they found the stability of tradition, a stability missing in modern life. Perhaps they shared their neighbors' interest in magic, or feared that, if they did not make a ritual doll and throw it in the river at the right time, there would be no rain and no harvest, but only starvation. They are proof that traditions cannot possibly be destroyed in the course of only one generation, no matter how hard that generation may try.

Ten years after collectivization came the Second World War and the years 1941-43 were especially brutal as they were the years of German occupation. Nazi troops burned villages to the ground and peasants who returned home when the war ended found nothing but bare earth filled with mines and bombs. There was tremendous loss of life and, out of each ten men who went to the front, only one returned. It would take another ten years to get villages back on their feet. When Khrushchev came to power after Stalin's death in 1953, he began another series of agricultural reforms. Collective farms became state farms. Internal passports were introduced. Pensions and, even more important, regular salaries were guaranteed by the state. For the first time in years, peasants had some free time and some extra money.

This was the second great blow to the traditional way of life: consumer goods became accessible and certain traditional means of production were lost. A peasant no longer had to grow flax, reap it, card it, and weave it just to make a couple of new shirts; new shirts and skirts and blouses could be bought at the village store. Extra time and money drove the demand for consumer goods and the villages saw their greatest exodus as young men went to cities for better pay. Prosperity in cities meant that there was a demand for an increased labor force and, for village men, the city offered the lure of bright lights, fast cars, apartments with modern conveniences, entertainment unlike anything in the village. Ten years of work in a city was enough to secure a residence permit, complete with a government-supplied flat with running water and an indoor toilet. It was at this time that the graying of the village occurred: most young people preferred the city and the majority of the village population became middle-aged or older.

Other factors affected the celebration of traditional rituals such as the summer holidays. In 1967, the Soviet Union celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the Soviet Socialist Revolution. This prompted a renewed push to eradicate folk customs. Thus, folk rites and beliefs were presented as foolish outdated superstitions. Communist leaders proclaimed an internationalist ideology. Thus, cultural and historical features associated with national identity, with a specifically Russian past, were targeted for destruction and folklore fit this category. In a word, folk songs and customs were seen as incomprehensible and senseless activities which distracted Soviet peasants from building Communism. In the drive to eradicate folk traditions, newly invented Soviet holidays were substituted for folk rituals. Official Soviet state power simply ignored the traditional tenor of life and peasants' moral ideals and, therefore, ignored folk culture.

Simultaneously, amateur folklore performances were cultivated and popularized on the stages of Soviet clubs in villages and through mass media to all other locales. The sheer number of these amateur "folklore" groups and the flood of their performances on radio and television helped stifle authentic folk culture. Only the most richly colored and most emotionally evocative folk rituals survived this onslaught. Yet, there was a counter trend and various factors aided the survival of folklore in general and the summer holidays in particular. For one thing, people needed a holiday. They wanted to dance and sing together, to drink and celebrate in unison. Probably the strongest driving force was a desire for communality, a deep wish to unite and share emotions. Old folk traditions satisfied this impulse and people who were born before 1930 were still alive and ready to share the songs and rituals that they had learned from their grandparents.

As summer holidays began a resurgence, the attitude of local officials varied. Because the 1960's was a period when a new agricultural policy was being implemented, the directors of state farms were appointed rather than elected. Most of them were villagers themselves, but from provinces other than the ones where they were appointed to positions of leadership. As a result, they were ignorant of local

traditions. Some had received a higher education and were inclined to look down upon folk practices as a result. Their reactions to local revivals ran the full gamut from attempts at eradication to approval and abetting. For example, in a place where there is a tradition of celebrating the expulsion of forest nymphs, women make a doll with exaggerated female sexual organs and sing erotic songs which border on the obscene. A state farm head who had never seen such a ceremony before, stopped his car to observe the ritual. As he listened more closely to the songs to make out their meaning, he was at first surprised, then charmed. He laughed and ordered that the women of the village be given an extra day off at summer holiday time so that they could perform the ritual in its full form. In other areas, official reaction was not so supportive and state farm directors totally abolished the celebration of summer rites.

The 1980's was a golden age of sorts for state farm workers. They received a relatively high salary, regardless of the economic results of their labor. Peasants bought televisions, video cassette recorders. People began to spend more and more on personal entertainment. Old people continued to assemble at traditional holiday times, but their impetus was primarily inertia. Middle-aged people did not share their interests and felt themselves to be part of a different generation and a different time. They understood neither the words of old songs nor the meaning and structure of ritual acts. At best, they could dance when the accordion was played and join in when *chastushki*, short improvised songs on contemporary topics, were sung. The youngest villagers did not participate at all, but formed a passive audience.

In the village of today, collective and state farms are part of the past. Russia's economic future is uncertain, but the tradition of summer rituals is still alive. One reason for the survival of summer rites in the face of all of the forces which should have destroyed them is that, in many respects, they are addressed to the world of the dead and dealing with death and dying must necessarily continue to be a part of human existence. Connections to funerary ritual are many. On the Saturday before Trinity Sunday, villagers visit the graves of their deceased relatives. In many villages, people perform the ritual called the cuckoo's funeral, which is a parody of a real burial rite. In many areas, on the eve of the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul, villagers heat the bathhouse to prepare it for their deceased relatives and also bring food to the bathhouse for the dead. Commemoration of the dead persists in modern Russia in a variety of forms. During such acts of remembrance, the entire family goes to the cemetery and brings food and drink. Villagers typically place an embroidered towel on their family graves to use as a table cloth. They eat together, drink together and sometimes sing laments to remember their dead. In many senses, cemeteries have become the focus of villager ritual activity, replacing churches. When people visit cemeteries, they do so as much to communicate with each other as to communicate with the dead. Gathering at cemeteries fulfills the strong drive to share collective emotions. There people can chat, share problems, complain about troublesome neighbors, make business deals. It is almost uncanny that, in the modern village, the

visit to the cemetery is seen as a more popular event than the more joyful parts of summer rituals.

Many of the other elements associated with the cult of ancestors and the commemoration of the dead are gone. Most people no longer believe in forest nymphs. Any collector, like the authors of this article, can find numerous stories about *rusalki*, but the gist of these is to deny forest nymph existence. Most informants state something to the effect that, "There are no forest nymphs any more. During the War, our forests were heavily bombed and so many of the nymphs were killed. Those who survived, escaped and went somewhere else. As a result, the forest has begun to spread. We do not have the technology to cultivate our fields and so the forest is taking over." In almost every village, old people say, "With every year the forest is getting closer and closer to the village. The forest is stepping on us and in the end it will squash us."

Another very important reason for the survival of summer rituals is that they have managed to adapt and to meet the interests and needs of people alive today. Many elements are gone or on the verge of extinction. Only a few old women sing traditional erotic songs and no one fears the forest nymphs or the witches who are supposed to be active at the time of the summer solstice. But folk culture resists oblivion. Instead of the old ritual songs, people have begun to sing modern ones. People may have forgotten how to draw the face on the ritual doll, but faces pre-printed on pieces of fabric are available and widely used. In the past, it would have been impossible for the women to allow men to carry the sacrificial doll of the summer ritual. Now men carry it all the time and villagers consider this mixed gender celebration to be much more fun than the single gender version of the past. The ritual also survives because it responds to the great vital force which arises in nature and in every being as the seasons change and spring and summer bring fecundity, new life. The creative power of springtime demands expression and the eroticism of summer rites provides just the appropriate expressive means. What of the future of Russian summer holidays? Our own feelings is that they will continue to thrive because in every village where we do fieldwork, we here people tell us, "As long as we are alive, we will continue to throw this doll into the river."