

Video-Recording Ritual Incantations and Folk Cures (1)

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During an expedition to collect folklore materials from the Semeiskii Old Believers in Transbaikal, we had occasion to make video recordings of a dozen rituals, including the preparation of a birch tree for Trinity Day, funeral meals (*pominki*), a blessing for the road, a church service, a baptism, and various healings.

During their more than two hundred year history in Transbaikal, the Semeiskie, who are living bearers of old Russian and Slavic oral tradition, have developed their own unique local practices. Their folk songs have been analyzed from this point of view [Eliasov 1969; Dorofeev 1989], and our expedition gathered additional primary material of this kind. Another of our goals was to explore Semeiskii traditions by examining other oral genres, including, in particular, incantations (*zagovory*).

It was P. A. Rovinskii who in 1873 was the first to publish Semeiskii incantations. He examined two incantatory rituals or charms, one of which was performed to cure “dry cough” (*sukhoty*) and the other, children’s insomnia (*nochnitsy*) [Rovinskii 1873: 123]. Subsequently other texts were published by N. Kirillov [1893: 117], G. M. Osokin [1906: 114-15], and V. Voskoboinikov [1930: 83-84].

In 1934 A. M. Astakhova joined a multi-part expedition to Transbaikal. It was sponsored by the Buriat Institute of Culture and the Institute of Anthropology of the Academy of Sciences. Astakhova was extremely interested in incantational poetry, although, according to A. N. Martynova, curator of the folklore archive at the Institute of World Literature, her trip was also motivated by the fact that her son had been forcibly settled in the area after his arrest, and she hoped to see him. In any case, her work on this material is worthy of respect, considering the circumstances under which she was collecting. Here it should be remarked that from the 1930s through the 1970s there was an unspoken ban on studying popular religious, mystical, or even mythological belief systems. It was not until 1986 that F. F. Bolonev was able to publish some of the texts Astakhova had collected among the Semeiskie of the Tarbagatai Region.

In the 1970s and 1980s various Semeiskii incantations were cited by folklorists as examples of a tradition that was dying out or being transformed [Davushkina 1975; Polishchuk 1975; Bolonev 1978; Bolonev 1986]. The most recent publications of such material came out at the very end of the last century [RKOFSDV 1997; Naumenko 1998]. Most of this material was

recorded from the Semeiskie in the Tarbagatai, Mukhorshibirskii, Bichurskii, Kitkhtinskii, and other regions of what is today Buriatiia. In the Krasnochikoiskii region of Chinskaia Oblast', to the east, where our expedition went, and where the Semeiskie comprise a significant proportion of the population, there had never been any organized collecting. Our expedition revealed the incantation tradition to be alive and well.

Our goal was to record incantations in performance – we were able to catch on videotape several instances of the ritual act of curing the evil eye (*sglaza* or *porcha*). Members of the expedition, Camille Perkins, Mary MacIlvery, Natalie Ross, and Vladimir Kliauz, assumed the role of patients seeking a cure from the *znakharka* (the folk healer, the woman who performs the ritual). We were almost never refused permission to film, so long as we could manage to convince the healer that the person really was sick. This was not difficult, considering that *sglaza* is a somewhat amorphous illness, often with no visible physical manifestations. Its main symptoms, for example, are sluggishness, a general malaise of an unspecific nature, low spirits, or a sense of failure.

On comparing the video recordings of the ritual acts we had recorded in several villages – Ukyr, Urluk, and Arkhangel'skoe (Kochen), which were between 30 and 200 kilometers apart – we discovered that the performance of the ritual was almost identical, although the incantations themselves were not. The ritual of healing the evil eye among the Semeiskie of Chikoi, and apparently also among the local Orthodox population, consists in the recitation of incantational formulas and a certain sequence of actions by the *znakharka* and her patient. These also make up a “text,” that is, the playing out of a plot among the given participants or protagonists. This takes place within the special confines of the home and comprises several standard elements.

During her actions, each *znakharka* recites particular words and incantations – they may be pronounced loudly or quite softly. (In the latter case we were able to learn the words later.) As is evident from analysis of the video recordings, the formulas used in the actual ritual are often made up of a complex of texts; each performer has her own repertoire and blocks of texts. The main block is recited during incantation over the water to be used in the healing. The incantation recorded from A. I. Aref'eva from Ukyr was composed of motifs from the spiritual verse (*dukhovnyi stikh*), “Son Presviatoi Bogoroditsy” [Dream of the Most Holy Mother of God]. The ritual plot centered on the Mother of God taking and carrying water to wash away disease. In the incantation recited by E. E. Mikhailova, also of Ukyr, there was a direct address to the Mother of God to provide salvation from the evil eye:

Mat', Presviataia Bagoroditsa, spasi, pamilui, raba Bozhava – takova ta – at spuskav, at kriksav, at siksav, at diannykh, budennykh, paludennykh, ata vsiakaia niachesti atliataisia, at buriatskava glaza, evreiskava glaza

[Mother, Most Holy Mother of God, save, have mercy on the servant of God, such and such [here the patient is named], from [unclean spirits] which terrify us, from those which make us scream, wet our beds (*siksav*), from those which give us no rest in the day or at night, on workdays or at noon, let him fly from all these kinds of impurity, from Buriat evil eye, from Jewish evil eye...]

This incantation was originally meant to cure a small child of sleeplessness, but, as is typical of folk healers, all the texts she knows are brought to bear on any given diagnosis; all the more so in the case above, in which the evil eye is clearly connected to insomnia.

Further on, the incantation refers to water which runs (*bezhit*) and washes off tree roots (in this way, it is understood that it will wash away the person's sickness). The words of A. M. Andreeva's incantation consist mainly of an appeal to God and the saints, asking them to help the *znakharka* drive away the evil eye (*porcha*) and charm the water so that it can wash away disease. P. K. Shekunova of Arkhangel'skoe also appealed to the Mother of God, angels, and saviors:

Bogoroditsa, angeli, khraniteli, spasiteli, sokhranite, v putiakh, u dorogu, ot zlykh liudei, ot neschasnova sluchaia, ot glaza, ot chernova

[Mother of God, angels, preservers, saviors, safeguard me while away on the road, from evil people, from an unhappy incident, from the evil eye, from the black one...]

The next segment of text, not used by all folk healers, is recited while the patient is being treated with the water that has just been charmed. At this point A. I. Aref'eva appealed to the Mother of God to save and preserve her patient. After she had prepared the water, A. M. Andreeva gave it to her patient (V. Kliauz), instructing him to wash with it at home while pronouncing the following words: "S gogolia voda, s rab Bozhova Vladimira vsia khudova" [May all things evil fall away from God's servant Vladimir like water off a duck's back].

Thus the main elements of the incantations, enacted by the *znakharka* during the cure for evil eye, consist of the following: an address to the heavenly powers (God, the Mother of God, angels, saints) for help in healing, and the washing away of disease (such as the evil eye or fear) by means of water. These motifs are directly connected with the invariable elements of the ritual

act. Analysis of the video recordings reveals those elements to be the following: the *znakharka* pours water into a vessel; she salts the water, while making the sign of the cross; she prays before an icon or icons and genuflects; she pronounces an incantation over the water (she “whispers” [*shepchet*] or “charms” it [*nagovarivaet*]); she takes some of the water into her mouth and sprays it on the patient; she has the patient drink some of the water; she leads the patient to a place in the home which is opposed in some semantically significant sense to the “beautiful corner” containing the icons. Such a place may be a threshold, cellar, or behind the stove); she pours some of the water into (or on) the patient’s hand so that the patient may wash with it, or she washes the patient herself. A recent description of this ritual among the Semeiskie of Buriatiia, in the village of Saratovka, Tarbagatai region, contains the same elements [Stadnik 2000].

The question arises as to whether the group of features that comprise the Semeiskii ritual cure for evil eye is of local relevance only, or whether it is more broadly typical of all Russian incantations. Existing scholarly literature is unable to furnish a precise answer to this question. While it suggests that comparable ritual actions for curing such things as the evil eye and fear are carried out in other areas of Russia, it is unclear what the standard practice is, and what the precise connections between the various component parts are. Further video recordings are necessary, although, unfortunately, these are still rarely made by Russian folklorists.

Despite the significant similarities among the ritual healings we recorded, each took place within its own spatial, verbal, material and individual-psychological parameters, and remains unique. Our observations show that while the behavioral pattern of the *znakharka* and patient was generally similar, in each case there were some elements relating to what we may term the individual *znakharka*’s “school,” the methods and understanding inherited from her “teacher” (*uchitel*). Thus P. K. Shekunova of Arkhangel’skoe poured water on the hands of her patient through a door handle, an act she said her father had taught her. A. M. Andreeva sat her patient down in front of her, made the sign of the cross over him using a cross which she held in her hand, and blew air all over him – something a priest characteristically does during baptism. Significantly, we learned that in the past Andreeva had attended church, where she had even sung in the choir, so that she was familiar with church ritual. In Urluk, Andreeva fulfills the functions of both *znakharka* and priest (she is even called *pop* – parish priest). This dual function is typical for the Semeiskie in the villages of the Krasnochikoi region, but it is unusual that Andreeva has come to fill it, given that she was not born locally.

Other elements of the ritual also depended on the particular situations involved. For example, in healing Natalie Ross, P. K. Shekunova first had her daughter massage the patient's head (*popravit' patsientke golovu*), because we had told her that Natalie had fallen down twice that day – the *znakharka* considered this to be one indication of the evil eye. It was thought that she had possibly had a concussion (*strusila golovu*), which, by the way, Shekunova's diagnosis confirmed by using a woolen cord. Shekunova presided over the entire healing, watching carefully as her daughter gave the massage.

The ritual as performed by E. E. Mikhailova of Ukyr and V. F. Negodiaeva of Arkhangel'skoe differed from the others in that there was no actual act of healing. These folk healers merely recited the incantation over water, and the patients were then told to drink and wash with it over the next few days. In general, the healing ritual that Mikhailova performed was something of an experiment, because she was not asked to cure the evil eye or a traditional illness, but instead to help the patient with pain in her knee. At first Mikhailova was unsure of her ability to cure a knee problem, but she nevertheless agreed to try. She did an incantation over water and told the patient to apply it to the painful place and to drink some as she wished. This experiment indicates that, for the *znakharka*, "charmed" water is a kind of universal cure that may be applied in the treatment of a range of illnesses.

Notes

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An interactive CD-ROM about the Semeiskie of Transbaikal is due to be published at the end of 2001. Entitled "Traditsionnaia kul'tura starobriadtsev (semeiskikh) Zabaikal'ia" [The Traditional Culture of the Old Believers (the Semeiskie) of Transbaikal], the disk has been

compiled and edited by Vladimir Kliauz. This special CD has been designed as an electronic reference work, and will offer, in interactive form, material on the folklore, music, and customs of the Semeiskie. It contains a complete bibliography on the culture and history of the Semeiskie (more than 500 titles from 1701 through 2001); an electronic library of their folklore (more than 600 works); full texts of rare and key primary and secondary sources; a photo gallery of about 300 images; and video materials (22 clips) of contemporary customs and rituals of the Semeiskii villages of Transbaikal. The disk will also be searchable, using the “yandex system,” which allows searches of both scholarly and folkloric texts. “Traditsionnaia kul'tura starobriadtsev (semeiskikh) Zabaikal'ia” [The Traditional Culture of the Old Believers (the Semeiskie) of Transbaikal] has been prepared with the financial support of the “Open Society Institute” foundation. The price is \$30 to include postage and handling. To reserve a copy, send a check (payable to Marcus Levitt) or contact Professor Marcus Levitt, Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA 90089-4353. Email: Levitt@usc.edu

(Translated by James Bailey)