

**B E L A R U S I A N F O L K L O R E****A R T I C L E**

## The Current Status of Belarusian Calendar-Ritual Tradition

Maryna A. Tryfanenkava.

Belarusian State University, Minsk

The most accurate and fullest understanding of the contemporary status of Belarusian calendar rituals may be acquired by combining synchronic and diachronic methods of investigation. Synchronic study bases itself on materials which have been collected, systematized, and published in recent years. Diachronic study assumes the analysis of publications and significant scholarly works of past years. The starting point has to be the first half of the nineteenth century, since it was at this time that a wide interest in folklore emerged in connection with the activity of the Romantics. This interest served as a stimulus to the beginning of systematic collecting. Earlier information is too meager and fragmentary to make judgements about the status of the folklore tradition prior to the nineteenth century.

The folklore of every people, the Belarusians included, is not monolithic and homogeneous; its existence and development are determined by the sum of its local phenomena. By synthesizing synchronic and diachronic approaches it is possible to trace the dynamics of distinct regional and local folklore traditions. At the same time, it becomes clear (bearing in mind, of course, the inevitably fragmentary nature of the information), that Belarusian folklore as a whole has remained relatively stable over the past two hundred years. This statement should be understood within the context of warnings being made even in the nineteenth century about the rapid extinction of folklore as a cultural phenomenon.

What is more, in certain instances the contemporary tradition appears more varied than recordings and publications of the last century would lead us to assume. For example, some rituals include a larger number of texts; such is the case with the spring ritual "Leading the arrow" (*Vozhdenie strely*) (1). It was first described at the beginning of the 1920s, although songs had been recorded much earlier. Briefly stated, its ritual actions are as follows: women leave the

village, singing as they go, and in a field bury specially prepared objects (women's adornments, a doll, or a green twig, which, properly speaking, represent the "arrow"). As they say, its purpose is to draw lightning away from the village. In the second half of the twentieth century numerous detailed recordings have been made in the area of south-eastern Belarus where this ritual is still practiced. However, it would be overly confident to assert that in this case we are dealing with the evolution of a folklore tradition, since the collection of materials in the nineteenth century was not conducted on a sufficiently wide scale to obtain a complete picture.

At the same time, when comparing modern and nineteenth-century recordings, individual losses come to light, particularly those concerning archaic ritual practices. For example, nowadays we have no information about the spring ritual whose central personage was Iarila (2), apart from a single description from mid-nineteenth century Belarus and the fragment of a song. The same can be said also about the rituals Komoeditsa (3) (a festival in honor of the bear) and "The wedding of the chimney" (*Zhenit'ba komina*) (4). However, it is entirely possible that these phenomena have not disappeared entirely, but simply that for the time being no one has been lucky enough recently to have recorded them. In this sense, the history of the ritual "Leading the bush" (*Vozhdenie kusta*) (5) is interesting. Descriptions of the ritual and the songs associated with it appeared a number of times in nineteenth-century periodicals. For a long time after that it was thought that the ritual had disappeared entirely; only in the second half of the twentieth century was it rediscovered in the Pinsk District of Brest Oblast' (western Poles'e in south-western Belarus). A somewhat different picture may be observed in the case of the ritual games played during Koliada (6), which possessed an erotic character: Iashcher (7) and "Tereshka's wedding" (*Zhenit'ba Tereshki*) (8). Although people no longer perform the games themselves, the songs that go with them are still being recorded.

Thus the calendar-ritual tradition represents a complex evolving system, where a synchronic cross section serves to throw light on the various historical stages in the existence of its individual elements:

1) Viable existence when the given element is used in accordance with its functional purpose. For example, a specific cycle of songs is sung during the performance of the corresponding ritual. This category includes folk festivals and rituals that have survived up to the present, such as Koliada, Bounteous Evening (*Shchedryi vecher*) (9), Carnival (*Maslenitsa*) (10), the summoning of Spring (*Zazyvanie vesny*) (11), the Volocheb ritual (*Volochebnyi obriad*) (12), the St. George's Day rituals (*Iur'ev den'*) (13) (in particular the rituals of driving the cattle out to

pasture for the first time and “Shaking off the dew” (*Striakhivanie rosy*) (14)), as well as “Seeing off the *rusalka*” [water sprite] (*Provody rusalki*) (15), Kupal’e (16), and many others.

2) Loss of function. When, for example, a ritual disappears but its songs are preserved. These, however, may migrate into other groups such as general spring songs. In so doing, the personages in them and their attributes may undergo transformation and substitution. Such a phenomenon (a “bare” song, i.e. one without its ritual context) was observable even in the nineteenth century. Thus the spring ritual of “Weaving the birch tree” (*Zavivanie berezki*) (17) is no longer performed, but the songs, which at one time were connected with the ritual, maintain their calendrical associations through being sung in spring. The Saint George’s Day round dance through surrounding fields (*Jur’evskii khorovodnyi obkhod*) (18) has also disappeared, although the songs are still sung on Saint George’s Day on the sixth of May.

3) Passive preservation. When songs are performed at the request of a collector, but exist only in the memory of the bearers of the tradition, as, for example, ritual round dance songs.

4) Total disappearance of both ritual and the songs connected with it. These include those already mentioned above: *Komoeditsa* (a ritual, invoked to help awaken the bear in the spring), “The marriage of *Komin*” (*komin* is a chimney through which the smoke from the stove passes). It may well be that losses of this nature are in actual fact greater even than comparison with the nineteenth century suggests, but we cannot hope to know anything about them, since no collector has ever come across these hypothetical rituals and festivals.

The existence of Belarusian folklore tradition as a whole, as well as its individual elements at the current point of time (as also in any other historical period) is determined by the dialectical interaction of the processes of development, stabilization, and loss, which are conditioned primarily by social and economic factors. It is obvious that folklore as such is preserved in so far as the conditions for its existence are preserved. A striking example of the almost total disappearance of traditional folklore is demonstrated by those West European countries, where the provinces are not economically backward compared with the cities, and folklore and ethnographic elements are utilized basically in order to create local color in festivals and celebrations. It is hard to say whether the same fate awaits the calendar-ritual tradition of the Belarusians. There exist a multitude of factors which cause apprehension as well as a degree of optimism, although on the whole calendar rituals seem more vulnerable than, for example, non-ritual lyrics.

The mass media and official cultural activities play a dual role in relation to the Belarusian

calendar-ritual tradition. On the one hand, outside interest in folklore, especially when television crews or radio reporters turn up, enhances its significance in the minds of its bearers. On the other hand, television reconstructions of rituals and ceremonies, festivals and mass celebrations have purposes other than the preservation of authenticity. They frequently fuse different traditions together with the aim of popularizing folklore as a whole.

Attempts to introduce elements that are untypical of a given local regional tradition are often connected with the activities of culture workers. For example, in the village of Motol' in the Ivanov District of Brest Oblast'' culture workers have organized a celebration of Kupal'e which is not characteristic of the area. One can understand what kinds of considerations motivated these people, because Kupal'e is undoubtedly one of the most striking and, more importantly, well-known festivals with elements of spectacle and an obvious Bacchic component. Villagers tell collectors that this is "not their" festival, although they have already become used to celebrating it in the way they have been taught.

Apart from this, from time to time new elements may be introduced by incomers from other localities. Thus in the village of Tyshkovicha in the Ivanov District of Brest Oblast'' a newcomer tried to foster the tradition of "Leading the bush." When she moved away, it was dropped. In the memory of the performers there remained only the bush song, which was also recorded from one of the former participants of the ritual with the remark that they never used to sing anything like this before.

Accidental factors play no less important a role in changing local traditions. Global catastrophes and wars cause enormous losses. Thus, after the accident at the Chernobyl Atomic Electric Station whole regions in the south-eastern part of the country found themselves in the fallout zone. Thus local tradition was doomed to disappearance or to short passive preservation in the memory of the migrants. After the end of the Second World War traditional folklore took its place in the list of irreplaceable losses. For example, in some places the ritual of "Seeing off the rusalka" (*Provody rusalki*) and the Rusalka game disappeared – old-timers can still recall them from pre-war days.

Nonetheless, the well-known conservatism and stability of Belarusian national character is highly suited to the task of preserving folklore. Changes are certainly not adopted immediately (if they are adopted at all), but only after a certain passage of time –enough for perceptible internal resistance to be overcome. In particular, this relates to country folk, who have gone on living "inside" the tradition, guided by long-standing customs and rules, and who condemn any

lapses in the accepted way of doing things. Unfortunately, a sad feature of the end of the twentieth century is intensified migration from countryside to city, something that is undoubtedly a consequence of difficult economic circumstances. Nevertheless, the bond between urban and rural relatives often remains unbroken. In particular, urban dwellers go off to take part in festivals such as Kupal'e, Koliada and Easter. They also take part in Toloka (19), a festival that occurs in spring and fall. The spring version has everyone joining in carting manure out to the fields and the fall version takes place when the harvest is finally brought in. Thanks to this, Toloka and get-together songs (*bessednye*, i.e. drinking songs) have been preserved.

#### Notes

1. "Leading the arrow", an ancient pagan ritual at the heart of which lies the ritual reproduction of the sacred marriage of the Earth and the God of the spring thunderstorm. The arrows-shafts of lightning were the latter's main attribute. At the present time, the "arrow" (a small piece of metal, a green branch, a ribbon, or doll) is buried in a field where winter rye has been planted, so as to protect the village from lightning.

2. Iarila (meaning a passionate person full of life) is the name for the Slavic god of spring fertility and erotic power.

3. Komoedita (literally, the eating of clods, but here, lumps of pea kasha) is a pre-Christian ritual involving the magical waking of the bear from its winter hibernation, thereby accelerating the arrival of spring. During the ritual people ate pea kasha and turned over from side to side in imitation of the bear.

4. "The marriage of the chimney" is a fall ritual in honor of the domestic hearth, the smoke from which passed outside through a special pipe (*komin*). The *komin* was decorated with flowers and ribbons, then grain and nuts were thrown onto the fire and wedding songs sung to the "groom" and "bride," who represents "Work."

5. "Leading the bush" was a late spring ritual involving a visit around the homes in the village by a "maidenly troop" headed by a "bush," that is, by a girl adorned with greenery and flowers. The cult of green vegetation and the cult of ancestors (the bush = the family) were synthetically fused in the ritual.

6. Koliada, the ancient pagan holiday in honor of the winter solstice, during which the ritual visit around peasants' homes was performed by groups of young people singing

congratulatory, laudatory, and incantational songs.

7. Iashcher, a ritual game round dance, during which girls by turn first gave up, and then demanded back their wreaths from Iashcher (= snake = dragon), thereby freeing themselves from the power of the dragon-like divinity of the world below the earth or beneath the water.

8. “The marriage of Tereshka”, a ritual erotic game, when those chosen from among the older participants to play the “mother” and the “father” bring the boys (*tereshki*) and girls together as couples. Here Tereshka generally stands for any boy who has finally decided to get married.

9. “Shchedryi vecher” (that is, rich or bounteous evening) took place on New Year's Eve. It was marked by groaning tables, carnival visits around homes, and varied games and entertainments.

10. Maslenitsa, the ancient holiday when winter was seen off, lasting a whole week. It was accompanied by the burning of the Maslenitsa, an anthropomorphic scarecrow symbolizing winter. On the last day people began to sing songs summoning spring.

11. “The summoning of spring” involves the performance at specific times of magical incantational songs, directed toward spring and its heralds, the birds.

12. The Volocheb ritual, which coincides with Easter, consists of a spring ritual visit around homes in the village by groups of men who perform congratulatory-incantational and praise songs. The ritual possibly developed in connection with the cult of the Slavic god of wealth Veles (Volos), from whom the name of the ritual has been derived.

13. Saint George's Day”, April 23 (or May 6 in the Old Style calendar). A holiday in honor of Saint George, the patron saint of domestic cattle and agriculture. The ritual of driving the herds out to pasture, and St George's dew (*Iur'eva rosa*) for the first time is part of this event. Folk belief attributes miraculous power to the dew.

14. “Shaking off the dew”, the custom of walking round a field on Saint George's Day with a loaf of bread, which was placed beside the shoots of rye growing there. If the shoots were higher than the loaf, a rich grain harvest was to be expected.

15. “Seeing off the rusalka”, the ritual of Rusalia Week, the week following Trinity Sunday. The ritual consisted of a solemn procession of girls with a rusalka at their head – a role performed by a beautiful girl in a large garland and with her hair loose. They processed out of the village into a cultivated field where the rusalka was left alone and everyone else returned home.

16. Kupal'e, a pre-Christian holiday coinciding with the summer solstice, and performed

on the night of June 23 (or June 6, New Style). Collecting medicinal herbs, lighting bonfires, bathing in the river in the morning, and watching the sunrise made up the components of Kupal'e. At the heart of the Kupal'e ritual lay the idea of the marriage of the Sun and the Earth, in honor of which the fiery fern flower supposedly bloomed in the forest.

17. "Weaving the birch tree", a Trinity week custom, connected with the cult of a green tree. Girls choose a birch tree in the forest, lead round dances around it, weave garlands and tell fortunes with them, share a meal, and swear sisterhood with the birch tree and with each other.

18. The St George's Day round dance procession comprised a procession of young people through cultivated fields on the saint's day, and the performance of incantational and magic songs to ensure a good harvest.

19. Toloka, a folk custom involving collective help in farm work rewarded solely with food and drink, rather than money. Numerous songs glorifying *toloka* were sung — here *toloka* is a general name for a group of voluntary helpers.

### Bibliography

The present bibliographic supplement is thematic, and contains folklore texts and investigations published in recent years about the calendar rituals and poetry of the Belarusians. An English translation is provided in brackets after the title in Belarusian.

#### Collections of Folklore Texts

Since 1970 the Institute of Art History, Ethnography and Folklore of the Belarusian Academy of Sciences has been publishing a multi-volume compilation entitled Belaruskaia narodnaia tvorchasts' [Belarusian folklore], containing both contemporary folklore and earlier recordings up to and including the nineteenth century. The texts are grouped according to generic and thematic principles; each volume is prefaced by an introductory article, and includes scholarly commentary and collecting attribution, as well as an indication of variants. In the case of songs, musical commentary and notation are provided. The following volumes in the series are devoted to Belarusian calendar rituals:

1. Valachobnyia pesni [Volochoh Songs], Minsk, BNT: 1980. (BNT: Belaruskaia narodnaia tvorchasts', AN BSSR. Instytut mastatstvaznaŭstva, etnagrafii i fal'kloru).
2. Vesnavyia pesni [Spring Songs], Minsk, BNT: 1980.

3. Vosen'skiia i talochnyia pesni [Fall and Toloka Songs], Minsk, BNT: 1981.
4. Zhanits'ba Tsiareshki [The Wedding of Tereshka], Minsk, BNT: 1993.
5. Zhniŭnyia pesni [Harvest Songs], Minsk, BNT: 1974.
6. Zemliarobchy kaliandar: abrady i zvychai [The Agricultural Calendar: Rituals and Customs], Minsk, BNT: 1990.
7. Zimovyia pesni [Winter Songs], Minsk, BNT: 1975.
8. Kupal'skiia i piatrouškiia pesni [Kupal'e and St Peter's Day Songs], Minsk, BNT: 1985.
9. Paeziia belaruskaga zemliarobchaga kaliandara [Poetry of the Belarusian Agricultural Calendar]. Minsk, BNT: 1992.

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1. Belaruski fal'klor u suchasnykh zapisakh. Tradytsyinyia zhanry. Brestskaia voblasts' [Belarusian Folklore in Contemporary Recordings. Traditional Genres. Brest Oblast']. Comp. V. A. Zakharava, Minsk, 1973.
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A number of issues have come out in the series Belaruski fal'klor u zapisakh vykladchykaŭ i studentaŭ [Belarusian Folklore - Recordings made by Teachers and Students] under the general name Metadychnyia ŭkazanni i iliustratsyiny materyial da praviadzennia fal'klornai praktyki studentaŭ I kursa filalagichnaga fakul'teta [Methodological Guidance and Illustrative Material for First-Year Students of the Philological Faculty undertaking Fieldwork in Folklore]. These are based on recordings of calendar and ritual poetry made in the last ten years:

- No. 1. Kaliandarnaia abradnasts' Ivanaŭskaga raiona Brestskai voblastsi [Calendar Rituals



of the Ivanov District of Brest Oblast'], Minsk, 1997.

No. 2. Kaliandarna-abradavaia paeziia [Calendar and Ritual Poetry], Minsk, 1997.

No. 4. Valachobnyia pesni [Volocheb Songs], Minsk, 1998.

No. 5. Kupal'skaia abradnasts' [Kupal'e Rituals], Minsk, 1999.

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