

Белова, О. В. *Этнокультурные стереотипы в славянской народной традиции*. [Belova, O.V. *Ethnocultural Stereotypes in the Slavic Folk Tradition*]. Moscow: Indrik, 2005. 287 pp. ISBN 5-85759-343-3

Ethnic stereotypes in the language and culture have been investigated by numerous scholars, yet this theme remains fascinating for researchers due to the diversity of local traditions, each forming a unique constellation of perceptions of and attitudes to the *other*. The universal semantic opposition of “*my own people—the other*” has a multitude of manifestations in different situations and contexts and research into its lingua-cultural antecedents and functional peculiarities is relevant for various disciplines in humanities and social sciences.

This deeply researched, well-structured and engagingly written monograph is a result of the author’s long-term study of Slavic folk attitudes to members of other ethnicities and faiths. In a short but incisive introduction, Belova points out that every ethnicity reflects about the collective self and seeks to determine its place in history and culture. To create such a “self-portrait” people do not only rely on written sources and historical facts, but also on century-long traditions and beliefs. The image of the *other*, be it a neighbor, an alien, or an adherent of a different creed contributes to the understanding of the self, and specific features and uniqueness of one’s own ethnic group.

Taking into account the interdisciplinary interest in ethnocultural stereotypes, the author built her study relying on theoretical sources in folkloristics, linguistics, psychology, and history. The empirical part of the project is based on a systematic analysis of her own and her colleagues’ extensive fieldwork in Polesie, Podolia, Carpathians, and Western Byelorussia, as well as folkloric and ethnographic investigations of these areas conducted in the late 19th - early 20th centuries. Moreover, she refers to the traditional folklore of Southern, Western and Eastern Slavs to demonstrate the universals of folklore themes, images and concepts. The choice of the regions whose folklore forms the core of material scrutinized in the book is not accidental: while boasting rich culture that still preserves many archaic elements, each of these regions borders on the Western world and has created its own “myth of Europe.” The *others* that appear on the pages of this book are those with whom the Slavs have had close contacts for centuries, such as Jews, Gypsies, Tatars, Turks, Germans, etc., and also those with whom they had only brief historical encounters, for example, the Swedes and the French.

In analyzing a vast body of material Belova makes use of a complex methodology, combining comparative-historic and ethnolinguistic approaches. Although the primary attention in the monograph is given to the interaction between the Slavs and the Jews, the study goes beyond a binary opposition of cultures, but creates a general Slavic typology of the image of the *other*, which includes folk ethnology (Chapter 1), folk interpretation of religion and faith (Chapter 2), religious rituals (Chapter 3), holidays and rites (chapter 4), and demonic motifs in the perception of the *other* (Chapter 5). The special merit of the resulting portrait is a combination of descriptions and value judgments, mythologized concepts and subtle observations, and above all the dialectics of learning about the self through learning about others.

Throughout the book the author discloses the ambivalence of the mythical image of the *other* which is constantly evolving between the two poles, that of alienation and tolerance. Particularly strong this theme emerges in the “mythology of neighborhood” based on stories about Jews. Although today the areas where fieldwork was conducted have become virtually monoethnic (first, the Holocaust and later mass immigration to Israel wiped out the Jewish presence from the Shtetl), memories about the culture of the lost neighbors are still strong. Side by side with stories that imply common ancestry of Jews and pigs, and attempts to explain Nazi persecution of Jews as a punishment for torturing and crucifying Jesus, there are narratives praising Jews as skillful and hardworking people. As a confirmation of a controversial attitude to the Jews Belova analyzes the “myth of the lost abundance”, recorded in numerous narratives showing compassion for the tragic fate of the European Jews in the 20th century and linking the deterioration of living standards in the area to the absence of Jews. In these and other analyses Belova masterfully shows how traditional plots intermingle with folk interpretation of history, be it Tartar incursions, the Napoleonic war, or more recent events, such as the Holocaust or Stalin’s purges.

Looking into the folk ethnology of the Slavs Belova presents the opposition of “*my own people*” vs. “*the other*” on all levels, from the perception of space to mythologized physical characteristics, such as body size, type and color of hair, and specific body smells. This opposition is also manifested in numerous aspects of everyday life, such as food and peculiarities of the household, traditional occupations, patterns of behavior, and even in “typical” diseases. Step by step Belova shows that the underlying principle of “popular ethnology” is ethnocentricity. Whether attempting to explain the origin of ethnicities in

contact, or deliberating on their way of life, Slavic legends and folk narratives concentrate on their difference from what is accepted to be the norm. The abnormalities are sometimes conceptualized as common ancestry with animals or as relatedness to demons.

With great subtlety the author treats the concepts of “alien” faith, beliefs and rituals in the traditional Slavic culture. Legends, novellas and narratives of our contemporaries all confirm that every folk group postulates the priority of its own religion over religions of the neighbors. Belonging to the same faith is inherently connected to the perception of ethnicity, and so tribesmen professing another faith are marginalized. Numerous examples quoted in the text prove that although convinced that their faith is the only “correct” one, peasants had only a vague impression of the religions of their neighbors and they relied on a minimal number of attributes to recognize an adherent of a different creed. As a result Jews, Tatars and Turks were identified on the basis of dietary rules, and the prohibition to eat pork was viewed in some areas as the main principle of Judaism and Islam. The “Jewish” faith was seen as archetypically alien and even Baptists and Adventists were classified as Jews for having sacral symbols different from those of the Slavs. Belova shows that being different is conceptualized as Jewishness, so the Jew is a generic *other* having little to do with Judaism. Excessive generalization and crude categorization of *others* typical of ethnocentricity is visible in the folk perception of their religions.

The chapter devoted to religion contains rich material on the Slavic folk legends about Miracles and the “Jewish Messiah.” Miracles are represented in folk paraphrases of the Holy Scripture and in legends about the origin of religious rites, practices and symbols. Besides, they are the key element in stories about conversion to Christianity. Messianic motifs appear not only in such “serious” genres of folklore prose as etiological and eschatological legends but also in humorous narratives which are akin to trickster stories. They do not only serve to expose the Jewish Messiah as the antichrist, but also to let the Slavic protagonist outsmart the Jewish “opponent” and prove the advantages of his own faith. This folk version of the inter-confessional dialogue emerges as a counterpart of the polemic treatises about the true and false Messiahs and is based on the stereotypical image of the demonized *other*.

Analysis of the folklore interpreting the faith and rituals of the *other* would be incomplete without dissecting the etiology and evolution of the Slavic folk versions of the blood libel. Born out of fear and insecurity in the face of poorly understood practices and customs, this mythologized

plot became an indispensable part of the portrait demonizing Jew, and it is an essential element of the prejudiced image of the *other* as a whole. The most striking feature of the myth, aptly shown in the book, is the ingenuity used by storytellers in modernizing the means of acquiring blood for evil purposes. While the deep structure of the narrative remains stable overtime, its details keep changing, thus proving once more that state-of-the-art technologies entering everyday life of our contemporaries coexist with the mythologized worldview of the lay people.

In the sections of the book devoted to the perception of rituals and holidays of the neighbors, Belova consistently shows the combination of alienation and tolerance in the attitude to the *other*. Fearing the evil nature of foreign rites, peasants are curious about them and are not averse to benefiting from their “magic power”. So besides material testifying to the interference with the rites of the *other*, the book provides interesting examples of Slavic culture integrating into them.

Throughout the book Belova makes subtle observations about linguistic aspects of the folklore texts. Lexico-semantic patterns constituting the image of the *other* are essential components of the Slavic linguistic map of the world. While linguo-cultural scripts of the concepts “friendship”, “destiny”, “truth”, and “soul” are thoroughly developed, the scripts “*my own people*” – “*the other*” have remained on the periphery. Linguo-cultural configurations of *otherness* marked as ambivalent, abnormal and dehumanized, as well as analysis of instrumental and symbolic approaches of the Slavs to the language of their neighbors presented in the book fill a serious gap in the scholarship.

Globalization has paved the way for an increasing openness of the borders, and consequently, for the growth of migrations. On the other hand, in many cases it results in isolation of some ethnic and religious groups, and triggers ethnic conflicts, discourse about transfer of some ethnic groups and even local wars. Mythologems of the *other* are widespread not only in the everyday talk of the lay people but are also used by politicians and journalists to manipulate public opinion and at times penetrate into the professional discourse of sociologists, psychologists, and educators. The knowledge of the structural peculiarities of these mythologems investigated and brought to light by Belova makes them recognizable in any context. This knowledge is essential for the neutralization of xenophobia when it masks as freedom of speech or professional terminology.

Given the wealth of subjects and names appearing in the text, the monograph would be more reader-friendly if it were supplied with

subject and name indices. This criticism notwithstanding, Olga Belova's book will find interested audiences among experts in various fields of humanities and social sciences.

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