

# **Video Encyclopedia of Russian Folklore**

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In Southwestern Russia a living source of folklore and ethnographic traditions still exists. Peasants of this region have preserved some of the most archaic layers of traditional culture because of the absence of large migrations, the relative isolation of villages surrounded by dense forests, and an only recently built railway. Genetically these folklore layers can be traced back to the period of Common Slavic unity.

The Smolensk, Kaluga, and Bryansk oblasts or provinces forming Southwestern Russia have always been known for their vigorous ritual, song, and narrative traditions. The basin formed by the Desna and Bolva Rivers possesses special interest in this whole huge territory because this basin is mysterious in regard to its dialects and to the characters in local mythological stories.

Analysis of the folklore traditions in Southwestern Russia reveals a continuation of the folklore of Polesie, which was a province of Poland before the Second World War but now is divided between Byelorussia (the northern section) and Ukraine (the southern section). For two centuries this area has attracted the attention of ethnographers who have viewed it as an archaic region and a territory of conservative folk culture. However, the Southwestern part has still been little explored in comparison with Polesie.

It is hard to believe that only 150 to 200 miles from Moscow peasants still make a ritual doll on Trinity Sunday. Everybody in the village joins in putting a ritual doll in the

river, believing that without this heaven will not send rains to the earth and the sun will burn out the harvest. According to the peasants' creative imagination, nearby forests are inhabited by mermaids, brownies live in peasants' houses, and demons populate bath-houses. Trees and herbs have special magic properties, and the behavior of animals and birds is full of good and bad omens. Thus when people hear a cuckoo in the forest, they ask the bird how many years are left for them to live and count bird's cries to get an answer. Even now peasants in southwestern villages think that if anybody gives clothes to a mermaid, she will in gratitude endow this person with health, riches, happiness in marriage, or magic power to treat others. According to folk belief, a mermaid is naked -- the only "clothes" she wears are her long, ankle-length black hair. If people move to a new house and do not invite a brownie to come along, they will know no peace or wealth.

Certainly not all people have faith in such beliefs, but they all can retell with pleasure an event which happened to them, to a relative, or to a friend. In every village someone can show you a lime-tree or a pine where witches get together for the sabbath during a full moon. In every village traditional healers can still be found -- they can cast a spell over snakes and treat dozens of human illnesses with herbs, massage, and magic spells. And there also are sorceresses who can entice or drive away somebody's beloved.

True folk artists are still living in the region. They are masters of oral narrative and musical traditions. Their exceptional skills in dancing, singing, and narrating have an international cultural significance. Unfortunately all these people are sixty to eighty years old so that the last generation of talented folk dancers, singers, and narrators may soon be lost.

Since the 1960's Russian scholars have emphasized the need for "complex studies" of folklore traditions. However, interpretations of folklore as a single socio-cultural

phenomenon have remained theoretical for one simple reason — there was no way to record folklore materials and to describe ethnographic phenomena in their entirety. If a philologist, musicologist, and choreographer simultaneously record the same musical folklore performance, and after this an ethnologist interviews the singers and dancers, their efforts will still not reproduce the true integrity of a folklore tradition, but they actually will make an understanding of the performers even more difficult.

From our point of view, video recording is the single and best way to preserve folklore culture. The video camera allows us simultaneously to record a text, a tune, a performer's gesticulations and facial expressions, folk costume, and the place where a performance takes place. A video camera allows us to expand objective information about folklore and ethnographic traditions so that they are not misrepresented by an interviewer's personal perceptions. Thus video recording not only increases the opportunities for studying folklore, but also enhances the popularization of folklore materials. We believe that professional documentary video recording is the best method to preserve authentic living traditions at the end of twentieth century.

Our project, a "Video Encyclopedia of Russian Folklore", has three main goals:

- 1) To make complex recordings of Russian folklore and ethnographic traditions -- field notes, audio recordings, videos, and photographs.
- 2) To make detailed studies of these materials -- transcriptions, making a computer data base, compiling maps and catalogues of different phenomena in folk culture, thematic and structural analyses of different genres and ethnographic phenomena.

- 3) To popularize the Russian folklore heritage — the presentation of its artistic potential and system of moral values by producing educational films and documentaries, disks, photo albums, and books.

Our project aims to document the rich and varied folklore and ethnographic traditions of Southwestern Russian by utilizing a variety of recording methods, such as field notes, audio recordings, videos, and photographs. The project will be centered near the town of Rognedino and will be focused on the following subjects:

a) Ritual folklore. Since field work takes place in the summer, audio and video recording of summer calendar rites is an important aspect of our work. We have already recorded such rituals as Ascension Day (Voznesenie), the cuckoo's funeral rite, Whit Saturday (Dukhovskaya Subbota), Whit Sunday (Troitsa), Whit Monday (Dukhov Den'), the Tenth Friday after Orthodox Easter (Desyataya pyatnitsa), the Day of Saint Peter and Saint Paul (Den' Svyatych Petra i Pavla), the Holiday of the Kazan Icon to the Virgin Mary (Prazdnik Icony Kazanskoi Bozhyei Materi), the Day of the Prophet Elijah (Den' Il'i-proroka), and the Day for the Transformation of Our Lord ("Yablochnyi Spas").

b) Mythological stories about spirits of nature and the home. Our goal is to collect as much information as possible about the characteristic functions and the appearance of each mythological character. Most important we want to demonstrate the "transitional" forms of such characters: Brownie (Domovoi), Brownie of the yard (Dvorovoi), Wood-Goblin (Leshii), Mermaid (Rusalka), Witch (Ved'ma), and Demon (Chert).

c) Folk songs. The repertoire of each village in the Desna River and Bolva River Basin consists of more than one hundred songs. We plan not only to record the texts of the songs and their tunes, but also to study the songs as a specific means of comprehending the world and as a form of expressing people's attitudes toward their world.

d) Traditional women's everyday and festive clothes, towels, and floor coverings. The existing folk woman's costume includes an embroidered shift (rubakha), an archaic unsown skirt (ponyova), an embroidered apron (zanaveska), a married woman's headdress (povoinik) and a pair of bast shoes (lapti). Although every village has its own style of clothes and embroidered ornaments, it is impossible, for instance, to find exactly the same shifts even in one village. Strict tradition encourages these folk embroideresses to use their imagination to produce delicately individual details in their clothes. Flowers, oak-leaves, woman's figures, horse's figures, and lace decorations are not simply aesthetic peasant notions. Embroideries convey information about the embroideress's age, the village where she was born and raised, her reasons for embroidering a ritual scarf, her mood during her work, and the mood she would like to transmit to those who might admire her towel. Since the towel embroideries preserve numerous archaic details of Slavic decoration, our studies of them may shed light on the complex history of this area's cultural heritage.

e) Peasant houses and household buildings. Peasant houses and household buildings are the last section of culture to which our field work is devoted. Our

main goals involve the description and video recording of a peasant house's exterior and interior, and the ways peasants have assimilated their house (life) space, and rites and beliefs related to the building of the house.

We intend to identify specific features shared by local traditions within the area, and based on the data collected to clarify the complex folklore and ethnographic picture of Southwestern Russia. Our purpose is to broaden and popularize our Russian folklore heritage.

Since 1995 our research has been included under the program of the Center for Field Research EARTHWATCH (Massachusetts). This organization has sponsored our project "Folktales of Old Russia." Under the communist regime it was practically impossible for foreigners to visit rural Russia, to see the folktradition, and to associate with Russian villagers. Nowadays everybody can participate as colleagues in our expeditions.

Our next expedition is scheduled from January 15 to 27, 1998. If you are interested in becoming a participant in our expeditions, please contact EARTHWATCH: 680 Mount Auburn St., P. O. Box 9104 Watertown, MA 02272-9924 USA. Phone: (617) 926-8200. Telex: 5106006452. Fax: (617) 926-8532. Our Program Managers are Andrew Roy, Karin Lappin and Lisa Hammerlynk. Our web address is: <http://www.earthwatch.org/x/Xminyok.html>.