

REVIEWS

Колосова, Валерия Борисовна. *Лексика и символика славянской народной ботаники*. [Kolossova, Valeriia Borisovna. *The Lexicon and the Symbolism of Slavic Folk Botany*]. Moscow: Indrik. 2009. 350 pp. Bibliography, list of abbreviations, index of phytonyms by language, subject index. ISBN 978-5-91674-026-4

The folk are extraordinarily observant. They notice everything about every plant, including the most lowly. And they find uses for just about every growing thing. In the book under review Kolossova shows all the intricacies and complexities of folk botany and she does this not just for Russian plant names, but for the plant names used by all Slavic peoples. Kolossova works from plant names and tries to show how they are related to plant properties and to the entire worldview of the folk. Because plant names figure so prominently, in the review that follows I give the Russian plant name first. This is followed by a literal translation in parentheses and the common English plant name in brackets.

In part 1 of the book Kolossova shows that terminology for plants can be derived from their color, be it that of the leaves or of the flower. Some plant names refer to size, especially when there are two similar plants or two varieties of the same plant and one has larger flower clusters than the other. Shape is important and plants with bell-shaped flowers are called *kolokol'chik* (bellflower) [bluebell], for example. The variety of plant names based on shape is quite large and some of them are derived from inanimate objects, like the example above, while others refer to body parts such as *adamova golova* (Adam's head) [a type of clover] or *serdtseva trava* (heart grass) [false lily-of-the-valley, May lily]. Surface texture accounts for some names and a plant with leaves that feel cold and smooth on one side and soft and warm on the other is called *mat'-i-machekha* (mother and mother-in-law) [coltsfoot]. Plant behavior yields such names as *nedotroga* (touch-me-not) and *vesnianka* or *pervotsvet* (spring plant, first flower) [snowdrop] for early blooming plants. Plants can be named after the places that they grow such as *zhabnik* (frog plant) [river weed] for a plant that grows in swamps. Smell is reflected in names such as *voniuchaia trava* (stink grass) [bugbane] and even sound appears in plant names such as *khlopunchik* (popping plant) [milkvetch]. Of course it is important to know which plants are poisonous when taken internally and the name *dur trava*, *beshennitsa* (stupid plant, wild plant) [henbane, stinking nightshade] provides that warning, as does the name *zhalnitsa*, *zhguchka* (stinging plant, burning plant) [nettles] for those plant that are injurious to the touch. Among the

folk, plants are extensively used for medicinal purposes, as names like *zhyvotnyi koren'* (root of life) [adderwort] indicate, and they are also used for magic, usually to attract the opposite sex, as seen in the name *pryorot trava* (attraction grass) [cornflower]. Plants can even be used for getting rid of pests, as seen in the name *blokhgonka* and *bloshnik* (flee-chaser) [pennyroyal] for a plant to repel flees.

Various plant names are part of an entire symbolic code and the next section of Kolosova's book shows how plant names and ideas about plants draw on folk ideas about the human body. Plants are named for almost every body part. Examples include *aniutiny glazki* (Aniuta's eyes) [Viola tricolor or wild pansy] and *chortove rebro* (devil's rib) [Valerian dubia, heliotrope]. Plant names can refer to how a particular item affects the body, as can be seen in *chistotel* (clean body) [tetterwort, bloodroot] for a plant used for skin imperfections and diseases. This section talks about gender and how gender is applied to plants. If a plant like *tysiachelistnik* (thousand leaf plant) [yarrow] comes in two colors, then one is considered male and the other female. Plants can be used to foretell gender and when *iartyshnik*, a type of orchid, sends forth two shoots, this predicts the birth of a girl while three shoots means the expectant mother is carrying a boy. Eyes, vision, and blindness are important in the folk imagination of the Slavs and eye-like appearance can be reflected in plant names, as already mentioned, and plants can be named for their ability to cleanse the eye as in *glaznaia trava* (eye grass) [eyebright] and their ability to close the eye as in *son-trava* (sleep-grass, a type of belladonna). Names referring to foreigners can be used for newly introduced plants, such as *kitaiskie orekhi* (Chinese nuts) for the English walnut, or plants that are disliked, such as *tatarnik* (Tatar plant) or *tatarin koliuchii* (Tatar's prickles) for thistles. This section also discusses ideas about clothing and items of adornment such as jewelry (*volchi sergi*, wolf earrings) [European spindle, spindlewood] as they apply to plants, often talking about appearance as in part one, but also about feel (*barkhatnik*, *aksamit*, velvet plant) [marigold]. There is also a lengthy discussion of numbers, with some numbers referring to plant parts (*dvoelistnik*, two-leaf plant) [coltsfoot], some to time of growth (*odnomesiachnik*, one month plant) [cutleaf anemone], and high numbers such as *deviatisil/deviasil* (nine powers) [a type of aster] applying to plants considered especially potent and useful in treating a number of ailments.

In addition to discussing plant names and characteristics, Kolosova provides wonderful legends throughout. Some legends were generated

REVIEWS

from the name of the plant, some from the plants' characteristics, and some from its uses. Thus *ivan-da-mar'ia*, also called *brat i sestra* (brother/sister plant) [wild pansy], has a bi-colored flower and is supposedly the result of a brother and sister pair who married without knowing that they were related. When they discovered the horrible secret behind their affinity, they died and became a plant. *Zveroboi* (beast/animal-killer) [St. John's wort] is also called *molodetskaia krov* (the blood of youths), *Isusova krov* (the blood of Jesus) and *bogorodchyna trava* (plant of the Mother of God). Its red spots are variously attributed to the blood of seven brothers killed in battle, drops of blood from the crucified Christ, and menstrual blood shed by the Mother of God. Saints' legends are particularly numerous in relationship to plants and the sweet smell of *vasilek* (St. Basil's flower) [cornflower, bachelor's button] is attributed to its being favored by various saints, St. Basil foremost among them.

The last section of the book treats plants the way that they are presented in most other books on herbalism or folk botany. That is, it takes twelve widely known and used plants and gives all of their characteristics: the various names applied to them, their various uses, the legends explaining their origin. The plants are *vasilek* [corn flower], *zveroboi* [St. John's wort], *ivan-da-mar'ia* [wild pansy], *krapiva* [nettles], *liutik* [buttercup], *oduvanchik* [dandelion], *pervotsvet* [cowslip, snowdrop], *podorozhnik* [common plantain], *polyn'* [wormwood], *tsykorii* [chicory], *chertopolokh* [thistle], and *iatryshnik* [wild orchid].

Because plants are examined from every angle, because many plants have multiple names and some plants that are different bear the same name, because there are numerous etiological legends explaining the origins of a plant's characteristics, there is a great deal of overlap in this book, a fact that Kolosova herself admits. Thus the *ivan-da-mar'ia* legend about the marriage of a brother and sister and the legend about the blood of the Mother of God dripping on plants both appear multiple times. Many plants are used for the same medicinal purposes and this information is given time and again. The high level of repetition makes the publication under review more suitable as a reference book than as something to be read from cover to cover. By the same token, this fact should not detract from the value of Kolosova's contribution. As noted earlier, the material covered includes all Slavic languages and cultures, not just Russia and Russian, and Kolosova and the people who helped her with non-Russian should be congratulated for this inclusivity. Kolosova should also be commended for trying new arrangements of her

material (the groupings by color, number, shape, gender, etc.) instead of simply following old practices – grouping material by plant rather than by plant trait or characteristic.

This book is a major accomplishment. To keep so much information straight and to cross-reference it the way Kolosova does is an enormous task. I did find a few mistakes when I was looking up the Latin version of plant names in my effort to provide English equivalents. But this is hardly surprising when one is dealing with this amount of information. I should also note that I may have made mistakes in my English equivalents, for which I take sole responsibility. Pictures of plants would have been helpful when identifying plants but such an addition would surely have increased publishing costs. The various indexes do make up for lack of pictures to an extent and they are very useful. Most important, the novel arrangement of the material does make one think about plants and plant classification in a new way.

Natalie Kononenko
University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alberta
Canada