

Я дивлюся в небо, там літають хмари
За тими хмарами живуть Боги.
Я складаю требу, кладу до алтару,
Жовтими іскринами сиплять вогні.

Ой Лада ріді Дана, яке наше життя стане?
Ой Лада ріді Дана, наше життя стане...

(З пісні Живосила Лютого)

I am looking at the sky, clouds are flying there.
Gods live behind those little clouds.
I am preparing my sacrifices and placing them at the altar.
The fire radiates yellow sparks all around.

Oh, Lada ridi Dana, what will our life become like?
Oh, Lada ridi Dana, our life will become like...

(From Zhyvosyl Liutyi's song)

University of Alberta

**MODERN PAGANISM BETWEEN EAST AND WEST:
CONSTRUCTION OF AN ALTERNATIVE NATIONAL IDENTITY
IN UKRAINE AND THE UKRAINIAN DIASPORA**

by

Mariya Lesiv

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor in Philosophy

in

Ukrainian Folklore

Department of Modern Languages and Cultural Studies

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Edmonton, Alberta

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ABSTRACT

Modern Ukrainian Paganism is a new religious movement that draws upon beliefs and practices from over a thousand years ago. It represents a mode of resistance to both the political oppression of Ukraine and the dominant position of Christianity in that country. Paganism spread among the urban Ukrainian intelligentsia in the North American diaspora after World War II, and developed actively in Ukraine after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Today, while experiencing a great decline in the diaspora, it is rapidly growing in Ukraine, involving many different Pagan communities and thousands of believers.

Pagans draw on a variety of sources including both historical chronicles containing information about old Slavic mythology and contemporary rural folklore that is believed to maintain remnants of the old pagan worldview. Although many folkloric forms have been appropriated by the Christian church, contemporary Pagans consider these elements to have originated in pre-Christian times and reclaim them for their own needs.

This work is the first extended study of Ukrainian Paganism in its post-Soviet East European context and in the North American diaspora, simultaneously comparing it with Western Paganism. It is based on ethnographic fieldwork, including participant observation of rituals and interviews with Pagans in both Ukraine and North America, as well as on archival and published materials.

While focusing predominantly on the revival of pagan folklore within this movement, this thesis demonstrates how the imagined past has become

important for constructing an alternative national identity in modern contexts of socio-political turmoil. The thesis suggests that this cultural revival often has little to do with historical reality, since there is limited primary information available. Like other revivals, it involves the construction of new cultural forms through creative interpretations of the ancestral past. Moreover, the obscurity of the past allows individualistic interpretations that result in many variations of similar forms. These forms are examined in their relationship to the concepts of nationalism, gender, charisma and power, religious syncretism, and aesthetics. This work is multidisciplinary in nature as it draws upon theoretical frameworks developed in fields of folkloristics, anthropology, sociology, cultural studies and art criticism. It contributes to the understanding of modern cultural processes that shape the national consciousness of people in various parts of the world.

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Я щиро дякую своєму братові і близькому другові Тарасові. Його інтелектуальні й творчі успіхи завжди надихають мене, хоч я вже не можу зараховувати їх до власних досягнень (як робила це колись, керуючись статусом старшої сестри). Він активно долучився до цієї праці, допомігши встановити перші контакти з рідновірами, а також неодноразово супроводжував мене під час польових досліджень, зафотографуючи

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I am deeply indebted to Dr. Bohdan Medwidsky, the founder of the Kule Centre for Ukrainian and Canadian Folklore at the University of Alberta, where I have had the opportunity to study and develop professionally for the last several years. His words of wisdom in the form of witty folkloric pearls such as “ще так не було, щоб ялось не було” [there has never been a situation so bad that it could not be worked out in some way] have often helped me look at things through a positive prism.

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The roles of my co-supervisors in my professional life extend far beyond this dissertation. When I first came to the University of Alberta to pursue an MA degree, Dr. Nahachewsky was the one who first altered my consciousness,

expanding my cultural horizons and teaching me how to think critically. His high standards and aspiration for perfection, although intimidating, were highly stimulating. My decision to pursue a doctoral degree was largely inspired by him. Dr. Kononenko, an unexhaustable source of ideas, energy and driving force, has taught me not to “sit” but to “move.” Offering her thoughts about “what one needs to do to become an academic,” she introduced me to the world of conferences and publications. She has always been there for me, even on a very short notice.

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INTRODUCTION

First Encounter

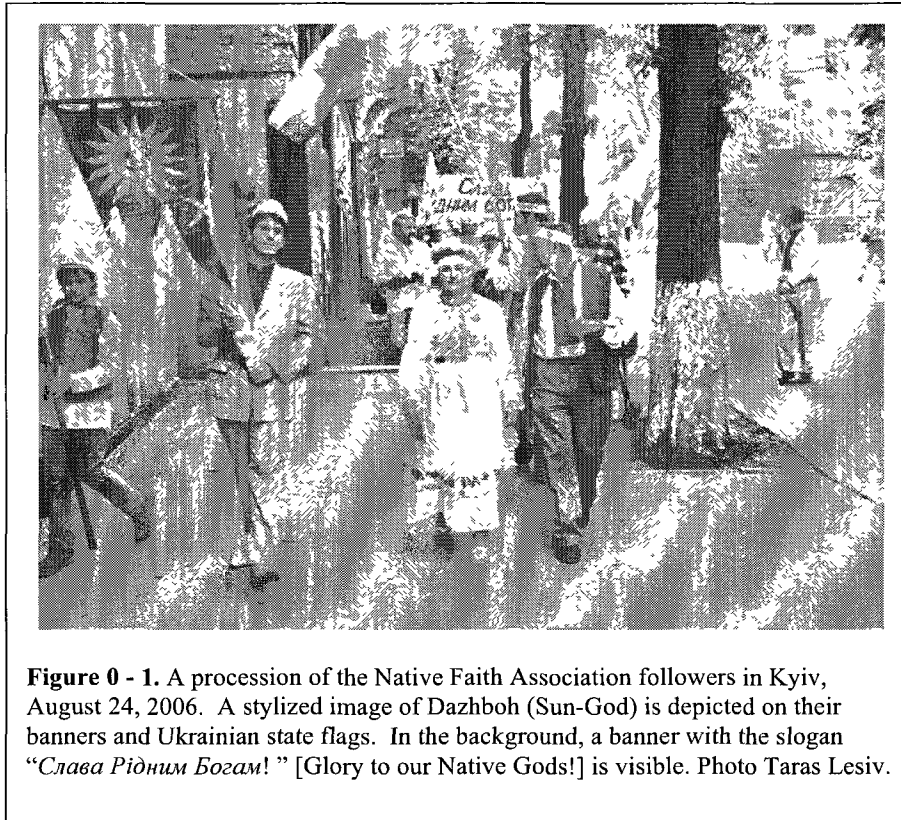
In the early 1990s, in Ukraine, I accidentally encountered a book entitled *RUNVira: Sylenko's Faith in Dazhboh* [*РУНВіра: Силенкова віра в Дажбога*]. Dazhboh is the Sun-god in old Slavic mythology. RUNVira is the abbreviation for the **Native Ukrainian National Faith** [*Рідна Українська Національна Віра*], founded by Lev Sylenko in the Ukrainian North American diaspora. Sylenko insisted that a true Ukrainian identity could be built on the basis of pre-Christian ancestral traditions. He reconstructed old Slavic polytheism and proclaimed faith in one God, Dazhboh. When Sylenko's ideas reached Ukraine they did not fit the mainstream national discourse of that time. The late 1980s – early 1990s were characterized by the revival of (Orthodox) Christianity in Ukraine, as a response to Soviet secular ideology and as a symptom of rising national consciousness. This view of Christianity and national identity continues to dominate in present-day Ukraine.

I had another interesting encounter over a decade later. I happened to be in the capital of Ukraine - Kyiv - on the pleasant summer day of August 24, 2006. This day was characterized not only by its enjoyable weather. It had a special significance for Ukrainians all across the world because it marked the 15th anniversary of Ukraine's independence from the Soviet Union. Thus, many celebratory activities and events were taking place in various parts of central Kyiv.

In this context, I accidentally came across a procession of approximately 100 people. They attracted attention by their clothing and various symbolic objects that they carried. While some members of this group wore casual everyday clothes, the majority of them were dressed in traditional Ukrainian village costumes or more modern pieces designed to evoke such costumes. They carried national symbols: the blue and yellow flag of Ukraine and variants of the Ukrainian state emblem - the trident. However, these symbols were combined with other elements, less familiar to the larger Ukrainian society. For example, the trident was incorporated into a stylized sun as the main image on their paper headgear. A stylized sun also appeared on the Ukrainian state flags. This symbol represents Dazhboh, the Sun-god from old Slavic mythology. The procession also carried many banners and posters with various nationalist messages as well as slogans glorifying the gods and goddesses of the old Slavic pantheon. These individuals were contemporary Ukrainian Pagans, specifically, representatives of the **Native Faith Association of Ukraine** [*Об'єднання Рідновірів України*] (Fig. 0-1).

While walking, the Pagans chanted: “Out with Jehovah! Glory to Dazhboh!” [*Геть Єгову! Слава Дажбогу!*], “Glory to Our Native Gods!” [*Слава Рідним Богам!*], and “There should be Native language and Native faith in our Native land!” [*На Рідній землі – Рідна мова, Рідна віра!*]. Their destination point was the monument to Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861), a famous 19th century poet.¹ As I learned later, many contemporary Ukrainian Pagans

consider Shevchenko their prophet and the messiah of the Ukrainian nation. The Native Faith members were going to honour their prophet on this important day.



However, as soon as we approached the monument, we saw another Pagan group surrounding it, also chanting “Glory to Our Native Gods!” [Слава Рідним Богам!]. **Ancestral Fire of the Native Orthodox Faith** [Родове Вогнище Рідної Православної Віри] was inscribed on their flags (Fig. 0-2).² The adherents of the Native Faith Association had to wait until their counterparts from Ancestral Fire’s ritual of honouring Shevchenko had concluded before they could begin their own ceremony. As an outsider, I wondered why these people were split into separate groups, as they seemed to proclaim very similar ideas. It turns out that contemporary Ukrainian Paganism is very diverse in terms of its groups,

particular communities [*спромади*], their ideologies, beliefs and practices. At the same time, they overlap in many ways.



Figure 0 - 2. Adherents of Ancestral Fire of the Native Orthodox Faith near the monument to Taras Shevchenko, Kyiv, August 24, 2006. Note both Ukrainian state flags and banners featuring an eight-pointed star (a symbol called *alatyr*) encircled with the name of the group. Photo Taras Lesiv.

Research Methodology

Since the 2006 encounter, I have studied Ukrainian Paganism in both Ukraine and the Ukrainian North American diaspora. In the spring of 2007 and from May to August 2008, I conducted fieldwork throughout Ukraine. Kyiv, the capital, and L'viv, the largest city in western Ukraine, were the main centers of my research. However, while attending and participating in various Pagan events, I made short several-day trips to other places in Ukraine, following Pagans to their sacred sites, camps, festivals and administrative gatherings. These places

include the village of Rashtivtsi in the Ternopil' oblast' (oblast' is the Ukrainian administrative unit equivalent to a state or province), the town of Briukhovychi, L'viv oblast', and the town of Kosiv, Ivano-Frankivsk oblast', all in western Ukraine, as well as the village of Oleksandrivka, Kirovohrad oblast', and the town of Melitopol', Zaporizhzhia oblast', in eastern Ukraine. Over the course of my research, I filmed many Pagan events that constitute over forty-five hours of raw video materials and conducted approximately fifty formal interviews, in addition to informal conversations.

I was equally interested in communicating with prominent leaders of the movement as well as with both their relatively "active" and relatively "passive" followers. Predominantly, the snowball reference method was used. The initial contacts were established "on the street," either during particular events or at street vendors where Pagans sell their literature. In the spring of 2008, I also visited the remaining most active Ukrainian North American RUNVira community in Spring Glen, New York state, where I interviewed the majority of the community's members and filmed their holy service.

In addition to fieldwork, I have studied Ukrainian Pagans through their numerous primary and secondary published sources as well as via archival documents. In the winter of 2007, at the Ukrainian Cultural and Educational Centre *Oseredok* in Winnipeg, I studied Demetrius M. Elcheshen's [Dmytro M. Ilchyshyn] fonds (1899-1983) containing Elcheshen's correspondence with the active Ukrainian Canadian Pagan Myroslav Shkavrytko.³ These materials shed light on the dynamic development of Ukrainian Paganism and, in particular, on

RUNVira in Canada. While visiting the Spring Glen RUNVira community, I conducted research in its Temple's archive and studied some private collections. This community has published the majority of RUNVira literature that sheds light on this branch of Ukrainian Paganism as developed in the Ukrainian diaspora throughout the world: Western Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand.

Over the course of this research, I have acquired a great number of materials produced by Ukrainian, Russian and other East European Pagans. These include brochures, flyers, audio- and video-recordings, periodicals and books devoted to various aspects of East European Paganism. In addition, I often visit Pagans' websites and am subscribed to several email-lists through which I receive their news.

Terminology

The term *paganism* deserves special attention. The closest Ukrainian equivalent to this English word is *pohanstvo* (поганство). However, it is rejected by the majority, if not all, Ukrainian Pagans for its derogatory Christian connotation. It associates with the Ukrainian adjective *pohanyi* [поганий], meaning "bad." Another Ukrainian equivalent to *paganism* is *iazychnytstvo* [язичництво]. Ukrainian Pagans' opinions on *iazychnytstvo* vary. The representatives of Native Faith Association of Ukraine accept the term in reference to themselves, but other followers of the movement find this term problematic, also due to its negative connotation imposed by the Christian

church.⁴ The only term that the majority of Ukrainian Pagans accept is *Ridna Vira* which means “Native Faith” and is included in the official names of many Pagan streams. Consequently, Ukrainian Pagans often refer to themselves as *native believers* [pідновіу]. While I use the terms *Native Faith* and *native believers* to address this phenomenon in Slavic languages, I prefer the words *Paganism* and *Pagans* while discussing them in English since an English-language reader can relate to them better.

In English, *Paganism* does necessarily not carry a negative connotation any more. It has been “cleansed” of such by both the followers and scholars of Paganism. This term is widely accepted within contemporary both scholarly and popular discourses connected with the conscious revival of old polytheistic beliefs and practices. Many scholars use the prefix “Neo-” in regards to this phenomenon, emphasizing its new aspects rather than continuity with the past. However, a more dominant tendency leans towards the term *contemporary* or *modern Paganism* that is preferred by many insiders of the movement.

Usually, with a lowercase “p,” this term refers to both ancient and contemporary forms of religion that resisted conversion to monotheism. In contrast, with a capital “P,” it describes those people who were raised in monotheistic traditions but made conscious choices to part with those, and began to build their spiritualities by reviving old (pre-Christian) beliefs and practices (Davy 2007:2).⁵ Since this is exactly the case for contemporary Ukrainian Pagans, I capitalize the term *Paganism*. In addition, capital “P” respectfully places

contemporary Paganism on the same level with other widely recognized religions. I use a lowercase “p” while referring to old pre-Christian beliefs and practices.

Reflexivity

The notion of reflexivity and the role of a scholar in his or her research involving human participants are widely addressed in those areas of social studies that employ the ethnographic methodology. The issue of reflexivity is very important for the scholars of contemporary Western Paganism. They are separately addressed in the publication *Researching Paganisms* (2004), where thirteen contributors discuss how their gender, life experiences, religious convictions, and other aspects of personal identities potentially influence the data they had collected. The authors also describe personal accounts showing how their engagements with the people and religious paths that they study shaped their own spiritual journeys.

a) Personal Background

Inspired by these accounts, I find it important to discuss similar issues in my research experience since my own identity is reflected in both the collected data and in my biases connected with the interpretation of these data. I was born, raised and received most of my secondary education in western Ukraine while that country was still part of the Soviet Union. I completed much of my post-secondary studies in the context of post-Soviet Ukraine. This was a time of sharp socio-political turmoil. Among other changes, I witnessed and experienced a

major shift in ideologies - from communist to nationalist - that took place at the state level over a very short period of time. This was especially true for western Ukraine, which historically has been associated with a higher level of national consciousness than the eastern part of that country. I witnessed an active process of the rewriting of history and the construction of collective memories about the past, with a strong emphasis on the colonial oppression of Ukraine by foreign political forces. Such memories were formed on the basis of witnesses' narratives, historical research and popular interpretations of both. They have become a foundation for the construction of a post-Soviet identity for many individuals and emerging organizations, including various branches of Ukrainian Paganism.

In Canada, while pursuing my graduate degrees (MA and PhD) at the University of Alberta, I have gained access to Western scholarly discourses including theoretical frameworks for discussing identity construction. These ideas helped to shed light for me on the complex process of identity formation as it appeared specifically in the post-Soviet context and within diaspora communities. They also assisted significantly in the formation of my own comparative perspective.

b) Relating to the People Studied

My fieldwork experience is characterized by the interplay of “native” and “non-native” identities. Many scholars who work in similar situations define themselves as “halfies” and report about being emotionally engaged in their research because they share the same background with the people they study.

These experiences, in turn, often shape writing strategies and theoretical frameworks (cf. Skultans (1998) and Lindquist 2006).

Although I do not share ethno-nationalist sentiments of Ukrainian Pagans, I have an insider's understanding of their roots. This results in my own biases to my research materials. For example, if an elderly North American Ukrainian Pagan mentions that he witnessed how his father was brutally killed by the NKVD, I do not expect this person to have an "objective" political perspective.⁶ Thus, I avoid judgmental comments about this person's "biased" views of his perceived enemies. It is easier for intellectuals with no colonial backgrounds to form "unprejudiced" political perspectives than it is for individuals with turbulent personal experiences.

During the course of my research, I could relate to Ukrainian Pagans on many levels. For example, I could identify with them through visible symbols such as embroidered clothing. As will be discussed in Chapter IX devoted to the notions of aesthetics and beauty, folk (peasant-inspired) embroidery is one of the most important features of contemporary Ukrainian Pagan dress. However, the same kind of embroidery has become a significant symbol of national belonging on a much broader level of Ukrainian society.

One encounter from my fieldwork illustrates how an embroidered piece of clothing helped me to establish a close connection with a Pagan community. While preparing for my trip to the village of Bohoiavlens'ke (Oleksandrivka) to attend the Tri-annual Council of RUNVira in 2008, I was told by a RUNVira adherent that every attendee of the Council would wear an embroidered shirt. I

brought such a shirt with me, and wore it on the first day of the event. Firstly, I did it out of respect for these people. Secondly, since I always prefer to remain a relatively “silent” and “passive” participant observer, I hoped that this shirt would help me to blend in with other people and be less noticeable.

It was “natural” for me to wear an embroidered shirt, as an expression of belonging to my culture as well as my response to aesthetically pleasing designs. However, the shirt served me much more than I expected. Although it had a different meaning to me than it did to the Pagan participants of the RUNVira Council, it became an important bridging tool for all of us. Around seventy people arrived in Bohoiavlens’ke from all across Ukraine. The majority of them were long-standing RUNVira followers who had known each other for many years. As soon as I put on my shirt, it immediately began to break the ice between me and those Pagans who wondered what I was doing there. Individuals who initially were giving me “questioning” and “untrustful” looks, began to approach and greet me warmly, calling me *posestra* (sister), as they addressed female insiders of their community. The shirt helped me to become accepted as an “insider” almost immediately.

Another factor that helped me relate to Ukrainian Pagans and facilitated my research process was linguistic in nature. Ukrainian is my first language. Moreover, I speak the type of Ukrainian characteristic for western Ukraine. Since this part of the country is associated with very strong national consciousness that, in turn, is very important for many Ukrainian Pagans, my origins presented me in a favourable light. If I had an accent in Ukrainian, it would have undoubtedly put

me in the position of an “outsider.” In a similar way, my native fluency in Russian, as a result of Soviet schooling, significantly helped me in conducting research among Russian Pagans who belong to Ukraine-based but more pan-Slavic-oriented Ancestral Fire.

The third factor that made me welcomed in Ukrainian Pagan communities is biological in nature and is related to Pagans’ racist sentiments. Several Pagans mentioned to me that I was one of them and could not belong to any other ethnic group because my face looked typically Slavic.

My focus on those factors that facilitated my research process is not to suggest that an outside scholar would be less successful in conducting research among Ukrainian Pagans or that this person’s work would be less valuable. This is, rather, to hypothesize that “outsiders” findings could be different. Although “outsiders” would have access to the same published materials, they could experience difficulties in conducting fieldwork. Although some Pagan communities are more inclusive than others, many Pagans clearly distinguish between “insiders” and “outsiders,” largely because of their ethno-nationalist orientations. I often heard Ukrainian Pagans stating that they did not represent any prophetic or messianic religion and, thus, did not see any need for missionary activities to attract more people. Paganism is viewed as their ethnic ancestral faith, and one cannot become “converted” but must be born into it. Thus, “strangers” are often treated with some degree of suspicion in Ukrainian Pagan communities. As an “insider” who was born into this culture, I was fortunate to avoid such treatment. Fieldwork, in turn, helps to reveal many interesting aspects

of Ukrainian Paganism that cannot be traced exclusively via published sources and archival materials.

c) Insider Vs. Outsider: Emic Vs. Etic Perspectives

The examples described above illustrate how one's place of birth and ethnic background serve as measuring tools that determine who does and does not belong to Ukrainian Paganism, and how this may affect research findings. However, the categories of "insider" and "outsider" as communicated within this movement can sometimes be not so clear-cut. Let me illustrate this with the help of one more encounter from my fieldwork. It is connected with a particular situation when I was perceived with a great degree of mistrust.

In May 2008, in Kyiv, I attended a public lecture by a RUNVira leader who spoke about a national identity crisis in Ukraine, offering his own interpretations of its causes and outcomes. Approximately twenty people attended the lecture. Since I was a new face in the audience and was taking notes, after the event, the lector approached me in a very friendly manner, inquiring about my opinion on his talk. However, as soon as I introduced myself and mentioned that I was pursuing a doctoral degree at a Canadian university, the expression of his face changed. It became very cold. The lector clarified whether or not I was born in Ukraine, and had no interest in talking to me after that any more. The following is a discussion of my understanding of what had happened.

One of the key points of the lecture was that Ukrainians have lost their sense of self because they have lost connection with their land. This is dangerous

because, historically, the ancestors of contemporary Ukrainians, as agriculturalists, had been closely attached to their soil. With the breakage of this attachment comes the loss of indigenous culture that is deeply rooted in the agricultural way of life. One of the ways that present-day Ukrainians are disconnecting with their land is by selling it to foreign investors. At first, since I was carefully listening to his talk, the lector perceived me as one of his people who shared his point of view. However, as soon as he found out about my connection to Canada, I was immediately placed in the position of the “other” associated with potentially dangerous foreign interests. My relocation to Canada was viewed as betrayal of Ukraine.

Interestingly, the fact that I was from Canada made me welcomed by many other Pagans, especially the representatives of RUNVira and Native Faith. As will be described in Chapter II, Volodymyr Shaian and Lev Sylenko, the first founders of present-day Ukrainian Paganism, both escaped from Ukraine during WWII. Sylenko lived in Canada for a while and eventually relocated to the USA. A community of Shaian’s most active followers was formed in Hamilton, Ontario. Many present-day Pagans in Ukraine view North America in a very positive light because it provided a fertile ground for the first Pagan leaders and their followers, enabling them to develop their ideas at the time when foreign political regimes forced them out of their native land. Halyna Lozko, the Ukraine-based successor of Volodymyr Shaian, asked me: “Please pass on my warmest wishes to all our people in Canada.” To her, I definitely was not a “foreigner” or “stranger.” On the contrary, I was associated with the sacred community of the remaining

followers of her Teacher (Shaian). In addition, the Hamilton community constantly provides financial support for various Pagan activities and publications initiated by Halyna Lozko. To her, this factor ensures their status as “our people” even more firmly.

My experiences within the communities I study exemplify the complexity of the *emic* vs. *etic* perspectives that are respectively linked to the categories of “insider” and “outsider.” As Sabina Magliocco aptly points out, the discussions about these issues are problematic “because they essentialize the very categories they attempt to elucidate,” implying that identity is a fixed rather than shifting, negotiated, and contextualized entity (Magliocco 2004:15). The encounters described above illustrate the complexity of “insider” versus “outsider” categories not only from my perspective but also from that of Ukrainian Pagans. My connection to Canada put me in the positions of both an “insider” and “outsider,” depending on the measuring tools used by particular individuals. Although I will distinguish between the *emic* and *etic* perspectives throughout this dissertation (*emic* will deal with the views of the people I study while *etic* will refer to my academic interpretations of their positions), it is important to keep in mind the complex nature of these very categories.

d) Interpreting Data

At a North American conference, after delivering a paper related to a particular aspect of Ukrainian Paganism, I was “attacked” by our panel discussant, a (North-American) historian. He “accused” me of not emphasizing that what

Ukrainian Pagans say about the past is not accurate and that they “make stuff up,” relying on their own imagination, rather, than on historical accounts. This “accusation” was intriguing because it revealed some major differences between our academic disciplines.

Many historians would admit that, like other kinds of research, historical research has its own biases. It is usually based on a selected amount of data that, in turn, is “filtered” by the biases of particular epochs, regimes and individuals. As Ukrainian historian Yaroslav Hrytsak points out, there is no “universal historical truth.” Instead, there is a collage of individual narratives about the past that are based on selected materials and individualistic interpretations.⁷ However, as my discussant illustrated, a tendency to search for “truth” still dominates among some historians. This tendency is especially strong in Eastern Europe, where contemporary Paganisms are often sharply criticized for their “artificial mythologization” of the past.

The search for “truth” is no longer relevant for the majority of (Western) folklorists and anthropologists. They, rather, concentrate on those practices and narratives that are important for the communities and individuals that they study, and examine those in their own right. The idea that any kind of revival is essentially a new creation is no longer questioned. (That is why I did not find it necessary to emphasize the self-evident in the short conference presentation mentioned above).

Although I do refer to historical evidence while illustrating a great creativity within contemporary Ukrainian Paganism in this work, I do not engage

with Pagans in any debates regarding the (in)accuracy of their interpretations of the past. I view these interpretations as Pagans' own narratives about the past, present and future. This is, of course, not to suggest that one should not make a distinction between academic and popular arguments.⁸ However, in my opinion, whether or not they are based on historical data, Pagan narratives deserve to be studied in their own right. This is especially true considering that they attract many people, as the rapid growth of contemporary Paganisms in Eastern Europe demonstrates.

Structure of the Dissertation

Many nuances of Ukrainian Paganism can be better understood if compared and contrasted with its Western counterpart. Chapter I "*Living With Honour*": *Contemporary Western Paganism* introduces and contextualizes Western Paganism on the basis of published sources. This chapter serves as a source of comparative reference in the subsequent chapters.

Since Ukrainian Paganism is a relatively new phenomenon and has not received much attention in academic literature, it needs an extensive introduction. The following two chapters provide this introduction and are predominantly descriptive in character. Chapter II "*Where Do They Get This From?*": *Sources of Ukrainian Pagan Beliefs and Practices* addresses the sources that nourish and shape contemporary Ukrainian and larger Slavic Paganism. Chapter III presents a general overview of the origins and development of Ukrainian Paganism. Then it focuses more specifically on the organizational histories, ideologies and

spiritualities of three major groups: Native Ukrainian National Faith RUNVira, Native Faith Association of Ukraine-Rus', and Ancestral Fire of Native Orthodox Faith.

In Chapter IV *Boundaries and Borders: Ukrainian Paganism in Its Cultural Context*, Ukrainian Paganism is placed in its larger Ukrainian and East European settings as well as in the context of the Ukrainian diaspora. I focus on Ukrainian Pagans' relationships with their other Slavic as well as Western counterparts. In this Chapter, Ukrainian Paganism is also discussed in its relationship to vernacular beliefs and values as reflected in such theoretical ideas as individual vs. collective, hierarchy and gender. At the end, Ukrainian Paganism is placed in the context of new religious (revitalization) movements.

Each of the following chapters is devoted to a separate theoretical issue communicated by Ukrainian Pagans. Chapter V "*We Haven't Given Up What Is Ours...*": *Past and Present in Dialogue* addresses the notion of the past in relationship to concepts of *creativity* and *authenticity*. It also shows how creative interpretations of the past result in a diversity of present-day Pagan spiritualities.

Chapter VI *Glory to Dazhboh (Sun-god) or to All Native Gods?: Monotheism and Polytheism in Contemporary Ukrainian Paganism* is devoted to a major source of tension between different Ukrainian Pagan groups, namely, the discourse regarding monotheism versus polytheism as the basis for a contemporary Ukrainian identity and spirituality. This conflict is based on Pagans' different understandings of *authenticity* and *creativity*.

Chapter VII *“Where Else Are Such a People?”: Ukrainian Paganism as an Alternative Vision of Nation* discusses Ukrainian Paganism as a nationalist movement, focusing on such concepts as national heroes/messiahs, sacred territories and the role of rituals and symbols in the creation of a sense of belonging to a national community.

Chapter VIII *“We Allowed Nature To Live In Our Holy Place...”: The Concepts of Nature and Power in Ukrainian Paganism* is devoted to the concepts of nature and power in Ukrainian Paganism. It addresses environmentalist concerns, the issue of ethnicity in its relationship to nature as well as the interactions between humans and nature in Ukrainian Paganism.

Chapter IX *“This Is Indeed Ours!”: Religious Syncretism in Ukrainian Paganism* discusses religious synthesis of many traditions and belief systems in Ukrainian Paganism. While many Ukrainian Pagans actively search for “ancient” roots and strive for “purity” and “authenticity” in their beliefs and practices, their efforts indeed result in new syncretic forms. I trace several layers of syncretism in this religion and focus on theoretical issues that particular syncretic forms communicate: and the construction of leaders’ charisma, (re)construction of the past with the help of present-day sources; and adaptation to new contexts.

The final (X) Chapter focuses on the notions of aesthetics and beauty in Ukrainian Paganism. It is exactly the aesthetic aspects, rather than exclusively political ones, that attract many people, especially young Ukrainians, to this movement. This chapter addresses several artistic elements, including Pagan dress and other components of physical appearance, their meaning and relationship to

individuals' status within their community. It also concentrates on Pagan altars and their relationship to the concepts of the individual versus collective, standardization, and power. In addition, I focus on folk versus fine arts and their different roles in contemporary Ukrainian Paganism. The issues addressed in this chapter lead to some hypothetical speculations about the future of this phenomenon. In the concluding remarks, I place Ukrainian Paganism in the context of modernity and globalization.

¹ The figure of Taras Shevchenko and his role in Ukrainian Paganism are addressed in Chapter V

² The term *Православна віра* (*Pravoslavna vira*) applied to a Pagan group strikes many speakers of Ukrainian because in contemporary Ukrainian it predominantly refers to the Orthodox Christian faith. The adherents of Ancestral Fire interpret this term in their own way. As will be described in Chapter 1, their belief system includes *Prava*, the world of Gods and Goddesses. The first part of the term *Pravoslavna – pravo* – refers to the world of *Prava* or *Prav* while the second part is based on the Ukrainian verb *slavyty*, meaning to “glorify.” Thus, to the followers of Ancestral Fire, *Pravoslavna vira* means the faith that glorifies *Prava*.

³ D M Elcheshen (1902-1983) was an agronomist and a politician active in various Ukrainian immigrant community organizations in Canada.

⁴ Native Faith Association's view on the term *iazychnytstvo* is addressed in greater detail in Chapter VII.

⁵ This distinction applies predominantly to the first generation of people who consciously parted with Christianity and accepted Paganism as the form of their new spiritualities. In contrast, their children are born into this religion. Contemporary Western Pagans develop a great variety of multimedia resources for their children. They also have a range of educational materials describing how to raise children in the spirit of Paganism (for an exhaustive list of Wicca materials devoted to Pagan parenting, see, for example, Dupris, no date). The topic of Paganism as a religion of choice as opposed to that of birth deserves further exploration. A comparison of Western Pagan-raised believers with their Ukrainian counterparts may constitute a fruitful topic for future research. At the present time, since Ukrainian Paganism in Ukraine is a recent phenomenon, the first generation of Pagan-raised believers is represented by very young children. The situation with the consequent generations of the Ukrainian Pagans in the diaspora is addressed in Chapter 10.

⁶ NKVD – The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (Народный Комиссариат Внутренних Дел (Russian)) – the public and secret police organization of the Soviet Union during the Stalin era. It is known for enforcing Soviet power through political repressions.

⁷ Round table “Confronting the National Past: History and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus,” 41st National Convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, Boston, MA, November 13, 2009.

⁸ As will be illustrated in Chapter II, it is often difficult to make such a distinction when it comes to Pagan literature and some politically-charged East European scholarship that overlap in many dimensions.

CHAPTER I:

“Living With Honour”:

Contemporary Western Paganism¹

In order to better understand the specifics of contemporary Ukrainian Paganism, it is worthwhile to compare and contrast it with its Western counterpart. The following discussion is devoted to Western Paganism. It is beyond the scope of the present work to provide an exhaustive description of this phenomenon. Instead, on the basis of both academic and Pagan literature, I provide a generalized overview of Western Paganism, focusing on those key themes and concepts that will be related to comparative discussions in the subsequent chapters.

Statistics

Western Paganism is a very complex phenomenon in terms of its forms of spirituality, specific beliefs, practices and great variety of communities. In academic literature, such phenomena as Wicca,² Druidry,³ Heathenism,⁴ the Asatru⁵ and Goddess movements, among others, are defined as forms of contemporary Paganism. Modern Paganism is also closely linked to the New Age movement.⁶ Some or all of these phenomena can be found today in many parts of Western Europe (especially England), North America, Australia and New Zealand.

Tanya Luhrmann estimates the number of people involved in Pagan activities within organized groups in England in the late 1980s could be greater

than several thousand (1989: 4).⁷ Kathryn Roundtree, who conducted her research in New Zealand between the early 1990s and early 2000s, speaks of several thousand feminist Pagans in that country (2004: ix). Paganism is reported to be one of the most rapidly growing religions in the present-day United States. According to the 2001 American Religious Identity Survey, approximately 307,000 Americans claimed belonging to various Pagan groups (Strmiska 2005: 1). It is estimated that the number of Pagans doubles every 1.5 years, and that these numbers are now gradually approaching between above 700, 000 and 1 million.⁸ Reportedly, according to the 2001 Canadian Census, 21,080 people claimed different forms of Paganism as their religion which, at that time, represented 0.1% of the total Canadian population. The Census also demonstrated that, like in the United States, Paganism is the most rapidly growing form of spirituality in Canada (Zenit.org 2004).

Although some raw figures can be collected and some estimates can be made, many researchers admit that gathering statistical data on modern Paganism is a very challenging task since this religion resists institutionalization. Douglas E. Cowan (2005) focuses on several statistics-related problems connected with research methodology. He suggests that, when survey participants claim that they are either “Wiccan” or “Pagan,” one has to consider the possibility that many people may provide this response as a “culturally fashionable joke.” In addition, many people who disclose Pagan religious convictions may not necessarily be new converts but, rather, those who were presented with an opportunity to officially acknowledge their beliefs for the first time. Furthermore, considering

that many Pagans still view themselves as socially marginalized (whether or not such sentiments are justified) some may not answer questions about their religious identity truthfully (2005: 195).

Collecting statistical data on the Internet (a widely used communication resource for Pagans) has its own methodological problems (Cowan 2005: 195). Cowan finds it dangerous to claim that Paganism is the most rapidly growing religion today (as Pagans often proudly emphasize) on the basis of simple Internet searches. His careful research of Pagan communication on the Internet demonstrates that while simple searches provide thousands of references to various websites related to particular aspects of modern Paganism, it may be only a small number of individuals responsible for a great many online interactions. (Cowan 2005: 195).

That Paganism is the most rapidly growing religion in North America may remain debatable. What is not doubtful is that this phenomenon is actively developing, and that Western Pagans make every effort to occupy their own niche among recognized and respected religions, simultaneously attracting a growing academic interest. Scholars studying “real” Pagan communities (rather than their online communication), constantly report large gatherings of people who are attracted by Pagan ideas. In addition, Pagan publications have reached a readership of many tens of thousands.

The Individual in Modern Paganism

It is difficult to trace the unifying characteristics of Western Paganism since one of its major features is its idiosyncratic nature. Individual intuitions, interpretations and perceptions dominate over any institutionalized “fixed” ideas. Michael York (2008), himself both a Pagan and an academic researcher of this religion, focuses on some advantages of a Pagan polytheistic worldview, pointing out that “there is always something for everybody there.”

Scholars find a large percentage of solitary practitioners among modern Pagans. For instance, in the USA in the early 1990s, solitary practitioners constituted approximately 70% of all individuals who identified themselves as Pagans (Clifton 2006: 12). Approximately 80% of present-day Wiccans are also solitary practitioners (Clifton 2006: 12). Scholars connect Western Pagans’ individualistic approaches towards their spiritualities with the social values of their larger societies. For example, while specifically discussing the New Age movement, Richard Kyle (1995) aptly links the idea of New Age individualism with individualism as a “longstanding component of American culture” (Kyle 1995: 45).

Individual practitioners may or may not join particular communities for certain occasions. Helen Berger, who focuses on contemporary Wicca in the United States of America, argues that an understanding of community in modern Paganism differs from the traditional perception of community. In contrast to “face-to-face long-term relationships” that are implied within a traditional model of community, modern Pagans form what Berger calls a “community of interest”

(Berger 1999: 125). The development of technology, including the Internet, and modern means of transportation enables people to unite on the basis of their interests rather than their location, or blood and ethnic ties (Berger 1999: 65-70, 125).

Due to the idiosyncratic nature of Paganism, even those adherents who belong to the same community often disagree on matters regarding their spiritual and ideological paths. Many view this diversity with pride, associating it with a personal spiritual freedom that is not always found within institutionalized religions. For example, while stressing their spiritual diversity, contemporary Wiccans point out that, depending on one's point of view, present-day Wicca can be defined as monotheistic, duotheistic, polytheistic, henotheistic and atheistic at the same time:

- **Wicca is monotheistic** (belief in a single deity): Some Wiccans recognize a single supreme being, sometimes called "*The All*" or "*The One*." The Goddess and God are viewed as the female and male aspects of this single deity;
- **Wicca is duotheistic** (belief in two deities; aka rarely as bitheistic): Wiccans often worship a female Goddess and a male God, often called the Lady and Lord;
- **Wicca is polytheistic** (belief in many deities): Many Wiccans recognize the existence of many ancient Gods and Goddesses, including but certainly not limited to: Aphrodite, Artemis, Briget, Diana, Dionysius, Fergus, Hecate, Isis, Pan, Thor, etc.;
- **Wicca is henotheistic** (belief in a single main deity among many): Many Wiccans view the many ancient deities as being aspects of the Lady and Lord, and view the latter as the male and female aspects of "The One";
- **Wicca is atheistic** (no belief in a deity or deities): Some Wiccans view the God and Goddess as symbols, not as living entities. Depending upon which definition of the term "Atheist" that you adopt, these Wiccans may be considered Atheists (Robertson 2009).

The ideas of feminist Pagans can serve as another example of diversity. While some of fully embrace the idea of “*the Goddess*” as a symbol of female spirituality, others prefer the more abstract concept of “Goddess.” Still others criticize both terms for sounding too monotheistic – “too like a feminized God” – and instead use a more polytheistic concept of “Goddesses” (Raphael 2000: 13). Even among the first group of spiritual feminists, “the Goddess” means different things to different people:

For some the Goddess is a real self-originating divinity in her own right; for others, who might consider themselves atheists, she is a liberating archetype whose power is psychological and political rather than external to and transcendent of the individual or movement. Others again will move freely between a number of positions. (Raphael 2000: 13)

The Collective in Modern Paganism

Not surprisingly, collective characteristics of particular forms of Paganism are often influenced by the larger social contexts within which they develop. This can be exemplified by contemporary Wicca, which was first established by Gerald Gardner in England shortly after WWII. (However, Gardner claimed that he was initiated by an old woman much earlier - in the 1930s (Adler 1979: 62)). This first form of Wicca was viewed as a “fertility religion” (Clifton 2006: 32). Loretta Orion briefly underlines some of Gardner’s practices:

Gardner gathered a cult of practitioners who celebrated the old agricultural festivals, worshiped pagan gods, sought altered states of consciousness by dancing and other techniques, and raised and released vital energy from their bodies for beneficial magical ends. (Orion 1995: 15)

Wicca was brought to the USA from England in the 1960s. One difference (among many) between the two forms of Wicca (British and North American) is related to politics. In England, Wicca was closely tied to British history. Gardner and his followers perceived it as “the true indigenous religion” (Clifton 2006: 32). These kinds of claims were not possible in the American context, where the term “indigenous” referred only to those people who had lived in this territory before the arrival of Europeans (Clifton 2006: 32). In the USA, Wicca, while maintaining many elements introduced by Gardner, absorbed the existing ideas about the “sacrality of nature” and environmental awareness of the 1960s and 1970s. As a result, from a “fertility religion” in England it has become more of a “nature religion” in the United States (Clifton 2006: 32-33).

Nature

Despite their great diversity, a majority of Western Pagans share a deep concern for nature, accusing the modern world of using nature as a resource for industrial growth and causing its destruction. Feminist Pagans especially accuse men of ruining the natural world through the development of science and technology, as it was predominantly men who were in charge of these spheres. Many feminist Pagans consider women to be closer to nature and, thus, still able to save the world.⁹

Resistance to Dominant Religions and Elite Institutions

Western Paganism is a mode of resistance to the world's dominant monotheistic religions, especially Christianity. In fact, the majority of American Pagans are former Christians. J. G. Melton's research in 1991 showed that 78.5% of Pagans in the USA were of a Christian background (25.8% - Catholic and 42.7% - Protestant). In 1995, Loretta Orion found that 85% of American Pagans were former Christians, with 26% Catholics and 59% Protestants (Strmiska 2005: 7).

In addition to historical accounts of events such as the Christian Crusades and witch-hunts, there are many other factors that undermine the reputation of Christianity in the eyes of modern Pagans. For example, considering their focus on the individual, Western Pagans often criticize Christianity for being very hierarchical and institutionalized, leaving little, if any, space for the formation of a spirituality based on one's personal needs and values.

Many Western Pagans also rethink those concepts associated with ancient paganism whose meanings have been twisted by Christianity and mainstream society. For example, present-day Pagans strive to "cleanse" terms such as *witch* and *witchcraft* from the negative connotation imposed on them by churches and from the humorous implications these terms have acquired within Western popular culture:

The negative connotation of the word "Witch" stems from hundreds of years of propaganda from the churches, and then later from Hollywood, regarding what a witch supposedly is, or isn't, or is supposed to be. Either Witches are agents of the Devil/Satan, or funny creatures in pointed hats with broomsticks.

I think that for us, it's worth taking on the effort of educating people, because if you counter people's assumptions about what it means to have a source of power that doesn't come from the authorities, that isn't "blessed" by the powers that be, that connects us back to our intuition and a world that is *alive* and where all the plants and animals and elements are speaking in conversation. (Starhawk 2001: 8)

Modern Pagan witchcraft is predominantly connected with alternative medicine and healing. While discussing the image of the Pagan Witch, Loretta Orion contrasts it with that of the Western doctor. She (among others) points out that Witches' power lies in their good psychological skills and the ability to alter one's consciousness. In contrast to traditional physicians who "conquer" illness, witches act more like midwives. Pagan healers strive to empower their patients to heal on their own. Unlike traditional doctors who depend on institutionalized research and sterile medical environments, Witches work independently, in their own settings and with the help of simple tools.¹⁰ From an insiders' perspective, Witches "represent nature as the Earth (dirt from the vantage point of their critics), while physicians represent culture and the benefits of purity and technology" (Orion 1995: 157-58).

Adherents of the New Age movement also oppose traditional Western medicine, embracing holistic health practices (Kyle 1995: 1). However, in comparison with Pagan groups their healing and spiritual activities present a somewhat wider range of components, including those borrowed from Eastern traditions (which are in part also successfully adapted by mainstream American popular culture): tarot, psychic readings, acupuncture, hypnotherapy, spiritual

healing, channeling etc.¹¹ Overall, the New Age is largely associated with esoteric knowledge and the paranormal.¹²

Another element that distinguishes New Agers from Pagans is their close engagement with psychology. Among the psychologists who have influenced the New Age, Carl Gustav Jung occupies the most prominent place.¹³ This is not surprising considering many Jungian ideas come out of his analysis of various esoteric traditions, including astrology, Gnosticism, alchemy, and the I Ching. To Jung, these traditions revealed patterns of human behaviour rooted in people's collective unconscious (Kemp 2004: 106). Jung calls these patterns *archetypes*. Unlike Freud who studied neurotics, Jung took great interest in successful and fulfilled individuals (whom he named "self-actualized people") and their "peak experiences." He believed that humans could gradually achieve "self-actualization" (Kemp 2004: 106).

Jung's idea of "self-actualization" is very important for New Agers. Although, like Pagans, New Agers criticize mainstream Christianity, in contrast to Pagans, they largely embrace the figure of Christ in their ideology (Hanegraaff 1998: 189). New Agers believe in great human potential and the ability to reach a high metaphysical state, uniting with nature and God. In line with this belief, New Agers view Christ as one who achieved this "unique divine status" and who can serve as an example for others (Hanegraaff 1998: 189-190). Understandably, New Agers' interpretations of Christ differ markedly from those of many Christians. For New Agers, "Jesus is a man who exemplified 'Christ Consciousness', and the

divinity that is man,” while for many Christians “Jesus is the Son of God, and is part of the triune nature of God” (Anonymous 2009).

Resistance to Social Norms and Conventions

Opposing the idea of hierarchy, the majority of Western Pagans do not recognize formal leaders, but only acknowledge “Big Name Pagans” on the basis of their talents and special services to their communities (Orion 1995: 130). For example, Starhawk and Margot Adler are celebrated for their written works that have reached large audiences. Reportedly, approximately eighty thousand copies of Starhawk’s first two books, *Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (1979) and *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics* (1982), were sold by the end of 1985. The first edition of Adler’s *Drawing Down the Moon* (1979) sold thirty thousand copies (Orion 1995: 130).¹⁴

Feminist Pagans link hierarchy with the patriarchal social system that, in turn, is associated with oppression, sexism, and racism, which they strongly oppose. Although feminist Paganism exists in many forms (“[feminist Pagans] may call themselves Witches, neo-pagans, pagans, Goddesses, Goddess women, spiritual feminists, Gaians, members of the Fellowship of Isis, Druids, and none [sic.] of these names” (Griffin 2000: 14)), all feminist Pagans resist the predominantly male forms of spirituality, searching instead for female imagery in their exploration of and communication with the divine (Griffin 2000: 14).¹⁵

While responding to societal norms and conventions, New Age followers share the idea that present-day humans are indoctrinated or “brainwashed,” to use their own term, by mainstream values (Heelas 1996: 18):

The mores of the established order – its materialism, competitiveness, together with the importance it attaches to playing roles – are held to disrupt what it is to be authentically human. To live in terms of such mores, inculcated by parents, the educational system and other institutions, is to remain the victim of unnatural, deterministic and misguided routines; to be enslaved by unfulfillable desires and deep-seated insecurities; to be dominated by anxiety-generating imperatives such as creating a good impression; to be locked into the conflictual demands of the ideal relationship. (Heelas 1996: 18)

New Agers strive to move “beyond the socialized self” – ego – and the “lower self” – intellect – through experiencing what they call “God,” the “Goddess,” the “Source,” the “inner child,” the “Christ Consciousness” the “way of heart,” or “inner spirituality” (Heelas 1996: 19).

Western Pagans often rethink the concepts of the sacred and the profane as understood by mainstream society. Orion, among others, describes how American Pagans often appear nude at their outdoor gatherings. To them, “[n]udity, among other things, represents freedom from cultural conventions.” Nudity is linked to the sacred space (nature), where it is safe to take off one’s clothes. Clothes, in turn, are associated with secular space and mundane existence (1995: 133).

The Past

The majority of Western Pagans draw their inspiration from the polytheistic religious traditions of the distant past, the time preceding the

emergence of the dominant monotheistic religions. However, ancient ancestors of modern Pagans did not have a print industry nor the means to travel far or often and, thus, their religious traditions were more localized. In contrast to their ancestors, contemporary Western Pagans have access to a variety of religious views and practices from across the globe. They selectively adapt information about the past to their own present-day needs. Donna Read's documentary *Goddess Remembered* (1989), featuring active American Goddess worshippers Merlin Stone, Carol Christ, Luisah Teish, Starhawk, Charlene Spretnak and Jean Bolen provides the following illustration:

The spiritual journey of the Earth's peoples began with the idea of a Goddess, universally called The Great Mother. We know that thousands of years before the Bible was ever written, creation stories centered around the Goddess. The reverence our ancestors once felt for the primal power of a female is reflected in those dimly lit times of pre-historic ages, when the power to give and nurture was supreme. Only recently, for six thousand years ago is recent in the age of human kind, has the Earth and the female perspective been ignored. A growing number of people are looking to the past through women's spirituality to find new visions for the future. They remember the eternal rhythms. They draw strength from the creation of their own Goddesses.

The role of Marija Gimbutas (1921-1994) in the establishment and universalization of the Goddess religion cannot be overestimated. Gimbutas is a Lithuanian-born scholar who immigrated to the USA after World War II. She has occupied a prominent position in feminist archeology. In her well-known works *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe* (1974), *The Language of the Goddess* (1989), and *The Civilization of the Goddess* (1991), Gimbutas interprets various aspects of Neolithic and Paleolithic cultures that existed in the territory of

southeastern Europe that she calls “Old Europe.” One of Gimbutas’ famous arguments is that the society of Old Europe was woman-centered with regard to its cosmology and social organization:

The very earliest symbols engraved on rocks and articles of bone or horn reflect a profound belief in a life-generating Goddess who represents One Source while pictured in many forms. From as early as 25,000 B.C., she is depicted with exaggerated breasts, vulva, and buttocks, indicating the centers of emanation of her procreative powers. (Gimbutas 1991: 222)

Gimbutas is convinced that what she calls “matristic ‘Goddess societies’” (the earliest civilizations of Europe, as well as China, Tibet, Egypt, and the Near East), while being female-oriented, maintained gender equality (Gimbutas 1991: 324). According to her, the “matristic societies” were peaceful because no weapons, except for hunting tools, were found on their territories. These societies ceased to exist after the invasion by the Early Indo-Europeans, or “Kurgan people,” who arrived from present-day Russia and transformed the civilization of Old Europe, introducing patriarchal, hierarchal, and warrior culture (Gimbutas 1991: 352).

Many scholars criticize Gimbutas for her biases. For example, archeologist David Anthony (1995) disagrees with her idea of the peacefulness of “matristic societies.” He shows that weapons and fortifications did exist on their territories (Anthony 1995: 94). Anthony also rejects Gimbutas’ hypothesis that Old Europe was transformed by the invasion of the Kurgan people, arguing that “[g]eomorphological data suggests deforestation and environmental degradation, rather than invading Indo-Europeans, as causes for the transformation of at least

some of these societies” (Anthony 1995: 95). Among others, Cynthia Eller (2000 [1993]) and Philip Davis (1998) accuse Gimbutas and her followers of inventing the past (Eller 2000: 93-115) and masquerading falsehood as truth (Davis 1998: xi).

Despite extensive criticisms of Gimbutas’s ideas, she remains one of the most important thinkers for contemporary Goddess worshippers. One can barely find a single publication devoted to the present-day Goddess movement that does not refer to Gimbutas’ scholarship. Patricia Reis, a Goddess worshipper and author, even dedicates her book *Through the Goddess: A Woman’s Way of Healing* (1991) to Marija Gimbutas whom Reis calls a “courageous pioneer,” “generous teacher,” and “spiritual mother.” Commenting on the film *Signs Out of Time: The Story of Archaeologist Marija Gimbutas* produced by Donna Read and Starhawk, Goddess worshippers refer to Gimbutas as “one of the most prolific archaeologists of the twentieth century.”¹⁶

Pagans respond to outside criticisms from their own perspectives. For example, Carol Christ, a Goddess worshipper and a scholar, comments on the idea of historical (in)accuracy in the interpretations of the distant past in the following way:

Most historians will acknowledge that *all* history writing is the product of selective reading of data. History is not so much a matter of fact as it is a matter of interpretation, affected not only by time and space, but also by power relations. Many historians will even admit that the existing written records for most historical periods are themselves limited and biased in favor of the powerful, given that most people were not literate and that only a few had the skills and the time to write. Moreover, they will agree that both chance and power politics have dictated that only a small number of the written records from the

past have survived. That is to say, many if not most, historians will concede that our views of the past are neither complete nor unbiased. (Christ 1997: 73)

Christ offers a new theoretical framework that she calls “Goddess hypothesis.” It deals with the interpretation of women and Goddesses on the basis of archeological, historical, and anthropological findings from the perspective of those who build female spiritualities (Christ 1997: 50). Feminist Pagans have introduced the term *thealogy* (*thea* means goddess in Greek), instead of *theology* (*theos* means god), in regard to these spiritualities.¹⁷

In addition to archeological artifacts and other historical evidence from the past, geographic sites associated with ancient times play a very important role in modern Paganism. Jenny Blain and Robert Wallis (2007) discuss how contemporary Pagans engage with the Avebury landscape, Stonehenge, Stanton Moor and other known sites in Great Britain, constructing a sense of ownership and heritage. Sometimes Pagans’ visions come into conflict with archeological and socio-political views of various institutions, including the British heritage industry. On the basis of these dynamics, authors call geographic landscapes that attract Pagans both “sacred sites” and “contested sites.” In a similar way, Adrian Ivakhiv (2001) studies what he names “contested landscapes” in Glastonbury, England, and Sedona, Arizona, USA, showing how the modern Pagan discourse on the sacredness of these two places is constructed through particular narratives, images and symbols.

As we have seen so far, the past plays a very important role in contemporary Paganism. It acquires the image of the “other” that opens horizons

for personal imagination and creative interpretation. Although their interpretations may not always correspond to academic findings, Pagans often romanticize and idealize the past, projecting their present-day concerns, needs and desires onto it. Feminist Pagans search for female power in the past, as a form of resistance to patriarchal authority today. By identifying with perceived female authority in ancient times they strive to establish their power in the present. Those Pagans who are not necessarily feminist in their orientation do not stress the idea of female spirituality in the past. They envision the past as a place where their ancestors lived in harmony with nature and the surrounding environment, relying on their human sensations and intuitions rather than on social conventions.

The Present

It is interesting that, while being fascinated by the “pre-historic” past and opposing many aspects of the modern world, present-day Western Pagans often communicate their ideas with the help of modern means such as extensive publishing. Pagan publications are based both on research of ancient paganism and on the present-day spiritual experiences of particular individuals and groups.¹⁸

On one hand, the engagement of Pagans in publishing comes as no surprise, considering that the majority of present-day Pagans are representatives of the well-educated middle class, as many researchers report. On the other hand, what Chas Clifton finds paradoxical about Wicca specifically is that “its propagation and its ongoing life occurred through textual means” despite its somatic nature (2006: 12). Clifton even calls Wicca a “textual religion” (2006:13),

and, to him, “[t]he story of the Pagan movement is [partly] the story of written texts: books, articles, letters, and correspondence lessons in Witchcraft” (2006: 3). In a similar fashion, Philip G. Davis, in his historical analysis of Goddess spirituality, stresses the importance of what he calls “Goddess books” as “professions of faith, and their authours as neopagan evangelists” (1998: 87).

Shawn Arthur (2002) focuses on another paradox - the fact that modern Pagans actively promote their ideas through the Internet. In other words, they communicate “nature-based ideologies” with the help of “non-natural” technological means (2002: 303). By doing this, contemporary Pagans demonstrate their attempts to expand their definition of the sacred “to include the possibility of the sacredness of technology as well” (2002: 303).

Ethnicity, Authenticity and Creativity

Initially, many modern Wiccans claimed that they either were hereditary Witches or were initiated by the established practitioners of the Craft. For example, it was important for the founder of modern Wicca, Gerald Gardner, to show the unbroken connection between his mid-20th century witchcraft and the traditions of the Middle Ages in order to legitimize the “authenticity” of his practices (see Gardner 1999 [1954]). Later, many Pagans opposed narratives regarding hereditary knowledge, admitting that they had nothing to do with reality (Clifton 2006: x-xii). For example, Margot Adler’s 1976 questionnaire for fellow American Pagans included the following question:

“How do you react to the following argument: *‘It is going to be impossible to ever write a true history of Paganism and the Craft, because so many people lied*

about their origins for so many years, lied, because they wrongly thought it necessary to have a lineage, that they now are scared to retract those lies. And these are often the same people who have done the greatest service for Paganism in this country.' How do you react to that?" (Quoted in Clifton 2006: x)

Today, Sabina Magliocco, among others, finds that many American Pagans combine elements from various cultural traditions in their own rituals “to construct an esthetically pleasing whole” (2004: 209). This approach is partly influenced by the context of cultural pluralism and the place the white middle class American Pagans occupy in it. Although many associate with a particular European heritage (English, Irish, Welsh and Scottish), others respond to questions about ethnicity saying “I’m nothing.” In this way they reflect the general tendency that white Americans are not typically perceived in ethnic terms and, thus, considered mainstream and not particularly interesting. Magliocco finds that, for many individuals, Paganism, with a basis in diverse ethnic traditions, is a way to establish a sense of belonging to a distinct culture that they would not otherwise have had in the American context. According to Magliocco, for many Pagans “cultural borrowing may be a form of compensation for feelings of loss of distinctiveness, as white ethnics become increasingly associated with a colorless dominant culture” (2004: 212).

The tendency to incorporate elements from various cultures into their practices is reinforced by the anti-racist sentiments of many Pagans. For example, Goddess worshipers often focus on those ethnic cultures/contexts where the Goddess is believed to have been worshiped in the past and/or is still acknowledged today. Oya of Africa, Inanna from Sumer, Cerridwen from Wales,

Frigga of Scandinavia, Nu Kwa of China and Coatlicue of Mexico are some such examples.¹⁹ By acknowledging female forms of worship from various cultures, feminist Pagans legitimize their own spirituality. However, they strive to universalize Goddess worship, rather than stress ethnic differences, emphasizing their anti-racist position.²⁰ In this respect, feminist Pagans are similar to New Agers, who, while borrowing elements from various cultural traditions, belong to “totally ethnic-free forms” of religion (Strmiska 2005: 20).

Magliocco labels this “all-inclusive” approach that overcomes national, ethnic, and racial boundaries as *universalist* (Magliocco 2004: 224). Michael Strmiska defines this form of Western Paganism as *Eclectic*, implying a free blend of “traditions of different areas, peoples, and time periods” (Strmiska 2005: 19). Not surprisingly, forms of *Eclectic* or *universalist* Paganism can be most often found in the British Isles and North America, where ethnicity is somewhat de-emphasized (Strmiska 2005: 20).

Representatives of this form of Paganism, while drawing their inspiration in the spiritualities of the past, are very creative in their interpretations of old beliefs and practices. Furthermore, they are self-conscious about their creativity, and often even sanctify it. Shirley Nicholson points out:

Acts of creativity are understood to contain a sense of sanctity, to be closely aligned with the creativity or creation of Goddess. New songs, new prayers, new chants, new rituals are welcomed and appreciated. Individual differences are encouraged, and creative contributions are regarded as enriching. If there is any “tradition,” it is that of embracing and accepting continual growth and development. (Nicholson 1989: 19)

Eclectic or universalist Paganism is closely associated with what has become identified by scholars as “cultural borrowings.” While “cultural borrowings” are welcomed by *Eclectic* Pagans they are not always approved by those who consider themselves “owners” of particular traditions. As Cynthia Eller, Sarah Pike and Sabina Magliocco have observed, indigenous groups, especially Native Americans, often find “cultural borrowings” insulting and believe they desecralize their indigenous traditions (Eller 1993: 67-82; Pike 2001: 123-54; Magliocco 2004: 215-18). For example, at the 1993 Parliament of World Religions in Chicago, some Pagans were accused by Native Americans of appropriating their cultural traditions, such as worshipping in a circle, referring to the four directions, and using burning incense for the purpose of purification. In response, Pagans insisted that these elements came from old European magical rituals rather than Native American spiritual practices (Magliocco 2004: 216).

Magliocco places the phenomenon of “cultural borrowings” in the larger American context of cultural commodification. She draws upon Pauline Greenhill’s emphasis that in traditional communities cultural practices are not individually owned. Magliocco contrasts traditional settings with the present-day cultural situation in the USA:

What distinguishes new forms of appropriation from old style cultural diffusion is...that it is occurring, for the most part, through the medium of consumer culture, thus bypassing any form of social exchange or reciprocity between the two individuals or groups. (Magliocco 2004: 233-34)

Despite the dominance of eclectic tendencies in Western, especially North American, Paganism, one can still find Pagans who closely associate spirituality

with ethnicity and, by extension, with race. For example, among the Wiccans from the Gardnerian coven in Berkeley, California, Magliocco encountered many individuals of Korean, Russian-Jewish, Irish-German, and Italian backgrounds who felt very strong connections with their home countries, and included many of their own ethnic elements into their Wiccan practices. Moreover, to these Pagans, their involvement with Wicca “is a way of maintaining ties to...[their ethnic] customs in a new cultural context” (Magliocco 2004: 212-13). Furthermore, some people feel connections with their ancestral traditions in romantic terms of blood and origin. Magliocco describes an intriguing encounter with a male Pagan who mentioned to her that “runes worked only for people of Germanic heritage” (Magliocco 2004: 235).

Some (but not all) forms of the North American Asatru movement, whose followers are mostly of Nordic background, represent what Mattias Gardell defines as “racist Paganism.” Asatrues biologize their spirituality (Gardell 2003: 146). While searching for their origins in old Icelandic sagas, they strive to trace the possible presence of their ancestors in pre-Columbian North America in order to claim their hereditary right for this land (Gardell 2003: 147). Gardell provides an interesting historical account. In 1996, an extraordinary skeleton was found near Kennewick, Washington. Radiocarbon exams showed that it was 9,200 years old, one of the oldest skeletons ever found in the USA. Some studies suggested the skeleton possibly had Caucasoid features. Intriguingly, scientists, Native Americans, and Asatruers, all claimed rights to this finding. Native Americans strongly opposed scientific studies of the skeleton, wishing instead to rebury

“their ancestor.” Asatruers were convinced that this was, indeed, their ancestor (Gardell 2003: 149-151). “The remarkable skeleton was worked into the ethnonationalist ideologies of both the Native American and Asatru communities” (Gardell 2003: 151).

Believers who “aim to reconstruct the ancient religious traditions of a particular ethnic group or a linguistic or geographical area to the highest degree possible” represent what Strmiska defines as the *Reconstructionist* form of Paganism (2005: 19). Strmiska expands on his definition:

This is not to say that Reconstructionist Pagans do not take liberties with ancient traditions and create their own interpretations and adaptations to suit modern values and lifestyles; rather they regard older traditions as better established, more authoritative, and more authentic than those that are newly created or vaguely imagined. (Strmiska 2005: 19)

The *Reconstructionist* paradigm in modern Paganism dominates in Eastern Europe (Strmiska 2005: 20). Although *Reconstructionist* Pagans are present in the West, they are markedly outnumbered by their *Eclectic* counterparts. We can trace a gradual shift in Western Pagans’ attitudes towards issues of “authenticity,” implying a close connection with ancient traditions (*Reconstructionist* form) and “creativity,” connected with the selective adaptation of old practices for present needs (*Eclectic* form). While earlier Pagans emphasized their connection with the past in order to legitimize their activities and power, many present-day followers of the movement no longer find this necessary. Adrian Ivakhiv argues that this change in view is partly influenced by academic studies on Paganism that frequently stress its creative nature (Ivakhiv 2005b: 29).

Communication and Inter-Group Relationships

Relationships between Pagan communities are dynamic and changing. Pagans (and New Agers) often engage in heated debates regarding various beliefs and conceptual issues. For example, Carol Christ, a follower the Goddess movement, disagrees with New Agers' view that "we create our own reality." Christ finds this kind of thinking "a dangerous and misleading partial truth," arguing that an individual has only a certain amount of control. She agrees that one can direct one's energy in such a way that it may bring positive results and draw desired situations (Christ 1997: 124). However, in her opinion, to claim that people can fully control the surrounding world is to deny that many aspects of our reality are socially determined. Christ further argues that, in addition to social circumstances that sometimes allow little, if any, amount of control, we cannot fully control our physical bodies. Even if one follows healthy nutritional regimen, avoiding foods and habits that may lead to a particular disease, one still has a limited amount of control in the case of one's hereditary predisposition to this disease (Christ 1997: 124-25).

Cynthia Eller illustrates interesting social dynamics while providing a historical overview of the interactions between specifically feminist and other Pagans. At the early stages of their movement, feminist Pagans refused to recognize any spirits and divinities other than the Goddess. They were also not willing to allow men in their circles (Eller 2000 [1993]: 37). Many other (non-feminist) Pagans strongly disapproved of this approach, arguing that both male and female presences were essential for a sacred ritual to take place (Eller 2000

[1993]: 38). Furthermore, many Pagans prefer to practice their spirituality in secret. On one hand, this was due to their fear of persecution. On the other hand, they seemed to enjoy the “concept of hidden lore, of mystical truths that could only be revealed to the initiated few.” In contrast, feminist Pagans tend to be more vocal and to enter the scene in large groups (Eller 2000 [1993]: 38). This hostile situation has changed over time, and today, one can observe a much more peaceful and welcoming relationship between the two streams.

According to Eller, Pagans owe this peace to particular individuals, especially Starhawk. Starhawk, who discovered both Paganism and feminism at approximately the same time (in the early 1970s) managed to make feminist spirituality more inclusive. She found a place for men in her rituals without changing the feminist character of these rituals (Eller 2000 [1993]: 38-39).

Among other factors that influenced improvement in inter-group relationships is the fact that feminist Pagans had already “won their right to the Goddess” (Eller 2000 [1993]: 39), demonstrating that time is indeed the best healer. For other Pagans, “feminists are no longer angry alien infiltrators in a settled world of happy, naked, dancing nature-worshippers; they have become a part of the scenery” (Eller 2000 [1993]: 39).

As one can expect, Pagans receive a great amount of criticism from their major enemy – Christians. Some earlier Christian critics viewed modern Paganism and the New Age in evolutionist terms, considering them “barbarian.”²¹ Not surprisingly, traditional Christians still often regard Pagan spiritualities as heresies and aberrations (York 2003: 159).²² It is perhaps the New Age

movement that has received the greatest amount of attention from Christian authors. Although some positive Christian responses to this phenomenon are known, they are by far outnumbered by hostile approaches (Kemp 2004: 133). Christians' attitudes towards the New Age can be seen in the titles of their publications: *The New Age is Lying to You* (Winker 1994), *Falling For a Lie: New Age Beliefs Nearly Killed Me* (Christian and Heavirland 1998), *Invasion of Other Gods: The Seduction of New Age Spirituality* (David and Carlson 1995) to name a few. All these publications approach the New Age from a Biblical perspective, promising to show their readers how this "satanic" movement "has invaded our society" and how to struggle against it.

Some scholars have critically analyzed Christian, and specifically Evangelical, responses to the New Age, pointing out their "reductionism, lack of definition and poor scholarship" (cf. Hexham 1992: 161). Hexham even hypothesizes that Evangelicals' failure to accept religious pluralism "could spell the death knell of Evangelical Christianity as an intellectually respectable force in North America and even Britain" (Hexham 1992: 163).

Contexts: Origins and Dissemination of Modern Paganisms

Although each form of Paganism has its unique origins and history, researchers underline various unifying reasons for the emergence of this phenomenon. Michael Strmiska identifies three factors that influenced the rise of the contemporary Pagan movement: Romantic ideas of the 19th century, the decline of existing power structures, and changes in the relationship between

religion and government (Strmiska 2005:45). These factors are applicable to varying degrees in different contexts (Strmiska 2005: 41). Let me address Strmiska's points in greater detail.

Many present-day forms of *Reconstructionalist* Paganism are rooted in the cultural revivals and independence movements of nineteenth century Europe. They are inspired by the ideas of European Romanticism and ethnic nationalism, which, in turn, were nourished by ethnographic research on folk customs, beliefs, dances and other lore in the context of general interest in pre-Christian times (Strmiska 2005: 42). Strmiska touches upon modern Icelandic Paganism to illustrate these influences. In the 19th century, when Iceland was a colony of Denmark, cultural revivals were closely linked to the independence movement. One of the goals of this movement was to return (from Copenhagen) the Old Icelandic manuscripts that included Eddas, Sagas and other literature, viewed as valuable sources on Icelandic ethnic heritage. The modern Icelandic Asatru movement is built on this "romantic appreciation of the Icelandic cultural heritage" (Strmiska 2005: 42-43).

As Giddens (1991) points out, people's "disillusionment with traditional authority structures of the modern world" is also among the reasons that contributed to the rise of Paganism (Strmiska 2005: 43). Wars, colonial regimes of the twentieth century, the development of nuclear weapons, pollution of the natural environment, and the massive spread of AIDS, among other factors, "have shattered popular confidence that government, science, and authority structures are able and willing to protect the general well-being of our world" (Strmiska

2005: 43). Technological progress is now perceived as a detriment to human progress, as it takes away the ability for humans to care for themselves (Strmiska 2005: 43). As a result, Paganism turned to alternative forms of power and spirituality, becoming what Faber calls “a retreat into magic in the age of science” (Faber 1996: 2).

The rise of Paganism is largely associated with both the European and North American counterculture of the 1960s and with the environmental movement. Feminist Pagan spirituality is closely related to the larger political feminist movement that began to develop at around the same time. Eller places what she calls “spiritual feminism” in the broader context of political feminism. Political feminism, although not having an explicit connection to spirituality, presented an ideological framework within which women began to question “why God was a man and women’s religious experiences went unnoticed” (Eller 2000 [1993]: 26).

A decline of Christianity in Europe, the United Kingdom and Canada also contributed to the rise of Paganism. Strmiska agrees that this breakdown may be partly linked to the general decline of traditional power structures (discussed above) since these were largely connected with Christianity. However, Strmiska offers a different interpretation of the situation, arguing, that “modern Paganism is one of the happy stepchildren of modern multiculturalism and social pluralism” (Strmiska 2005: 45). Until relatively recently, Christianity was embedded into the political systems of European and North American states. To be born in a particular place meant to be born into a particular denomination of Christianity,

and any resistance to the mainstream would be met with persecution. The ideas of religious liberty and tolerance adopted recently by these societies introduced a wide range of alternative choices (Strmiska 2005: 45).

Clearly, the phenomenon of Paganism that thrives today in the predominantly Christian world of Western Europe, North America and elsewhere challenges previous academic hypotheses regarding the future of religion. For some time scholars of religion accepted the evolutionist idea that paganism had been long discredited and replaced by a superior (monotheistic) religion. The rapid growth of contemporary Paganism also challenges the so called “secularism hypothesis” that implies that with the development of science and technology, religion is expected to gradually disappear (Strmiska 2005: 42). The rapid growth of Paganism suggests the opposite.

¹ I am borrowing the phrase “Living with Honour” from the title of Emma Restall Orr’s book *Living with Honour A Pagan Ethics* (2007) that provides an insider’s perspective on Western Paganism

² For a detailed historical discussion of Wicca in Europe, see Hutton 1999 Hutton uses the terms *witch*, *witchcraft* and *magic* in regards to what is widely defined today as forms of contemporary Paganism by both insiders and critics For a history of Wicca in the USA, see Clifton 2006 For a popular comprehensive description of Wiccan beliefs and practices, see Duff 2003

³ For a discussion of both historical and modern Druids, see Harvey 1997 17-34 Harvey focuses predominantly on Druid spirituality, organizations, and activities See also Hutton 2003 239-58 for a historical overview of modern Druidism

⁴ For a general observation of modern Heathens see Harvey 1997 53-68

⁵ For a historical overview and characteristics of the (Norse) Asatru movement, see Gardell 2003 and Kaplan 1997 69-99

⁶ For a historical overview of the New Age and its characteristics see, among others, see James R. Lewis and J. Gordon Melton, eds 1992 and Hanegraaff 1998

⁷ Throughout her book, Luhrmann, like Hutton, predominantly uses the terms *witch*, *witchcraft* and *magic* rather than Paganism

⁸ This estimate is made by The Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance See Anonymous 2008

⁹ Feminist views of nature are explicitly presented in the film *Goddess Remembered* discussed below The views of nature within both Western and East European forms of Paganism will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter IV

¹⁰ For discussions of techniques and practices of both historical and contemporary witches and shamans, see Clifton, ed. 1994.

¹¹ Some scholars are concerned with the way the term “New Age” has been used over recent decades, including the way has been adapted by popular culture. They prefer to speak about this movement as “alternative spirituality.” See Sutcliffe and Bowman 2000. Similar issues are addressed by Drury 1999.

¹² For a discussion of esoteric and paranormal features of the New Age, see Faber 1996.

¹³ See, for example, Ferguson 1993 and Heelas’s 1996: 46-7. Daren Kemp focuses on various other psychological theories that are important to New Agers in addition to Jungian ideas (Kemp 2004: 106-127).

¹⁴ In their works, both authors provide insiders’ views on contemporary Paganism and rich descriptive accounts of Pagan beliefs and practices, including rituals, chants, and incantations.

¹⁵ One of the pioneering voices in feminist criticism of Christianity belongs to Merlin Stone, who inspired many followers of the Goddess religion. In her work *When God Was a Woman* (1976), originally published under the title *The Paradise Papers*, she speculates about forms of spirituality in prehistoric and historic periods. Stone argues that the patriarchal Christian God appeared only in historic times, while in ancient eras people viewed their supreme creator as female (Stone 1976: xii). While striving to support this idea in her two-volume work *Ancient Mirrors of Womanhood: Our Goddess and Heroine Heritage* (1984 [1979]), Stone collects folklore (myths, stories and prayers) from various ancient and modern cultures, trying to trace the remnants of female-oriented spiritualities in these materials.

¹⁶ Anonymous, no date. “Signs Out of Time: The Story of Archeologist Marija Gimbutas,” *Reclaiming Quarterly: The Magazine for Witchcraft and Magical Activism*, <http://www.reclaimingquarterly.org/wcb/gimbutas/gimbutas1.html>, last consulted on December 12, 2010. Among other popular publications devoted to the Goddess religion that are influenced by Gimbutas’s ideas are Anne Baring and Jules Cashford’s *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image* (1991), Elinor W. Gadon’s *The Once and Future Goddess: A Symbol For Our Time* (1989)

¹⁷ This term was first proposed by Naomi Goldenberg (1979: 96). Today, *thealogy* appears to be firmly established in both popular and academic discourses on feminist spirituality. See, for example, Walker 2000: 26, Raphael 2000 and Griffin, ed. 2000.

¹⁸ Gerald Gardner’s *Witchcraft Today* (1954) has become the foundation of modern Wicca, especially its original British form, while Starwark’s *The Spiral Dance* (mentioned above) greatly influenced American Paganism.

¹⁹ For popular and academic interpretations of various female deities employed by Goddess worshipers see Nicholson 1989; Christ 1997: 50-88; Reid 2005: 25-45; Austen 1990; Getty 1990; Billington and Green, eds. 1996; Olson, ed. 1983, Leeming and Page, eds. 1994; Cleary and Aziz 2000; Husan 2003 [1997]; Edwards 1991.

²⁰ Among other sources, the ideas of universality of the Goddess are presented in Donna Read’s film *Goddess Remembered* (1989). See also Austen 1990, Getty 1990, and Ozanicc 1993.

²¹ See, for example, Henry 1988 [1970].

²² For a Christian perspective on modern Paganism in general and certain groups in particular see Burnett 1992 [1991].

CHAPTER II:

“Where Do They Get This From?”:

Sources of Ukrainian Pagan Beliefs and Practices

On April 28, 2007, the followers of the Ancestral Fire of the Native Orthodox Faith [*Родове Вогнище Рідної Православної Віри*] gathered on the Khoryvytsia Mountain, an undeveloped, natural area in the centre of Kyiv. They met for their weekly Sunday ceremony of *Slavlennia* [Glorifying Gods and Goddesses]. I attended the ceremony in order to observe their sacred ritual.

The rite was conducted by Arseniia, the groups' leader, according to the *Service Book of the Native Orthodox Faith* [*Малий Требник Рідної Православної Віри*] (Mezhymyr 2005), where *Slavlennia* is described in detail.¹ The ritual is performed in a circle and embraces several stages: 1. Glorifying the Gods and sanctifying the place where the ceremony is to be held [*Прославлення*]; 2. Opening of the Sacred Gate through which the Gods are believed to enter the ritual [*Відкриття Брами Вирію*]; 3. Presenting Offerings to the Gods in the form of sacrificial crops, symbolizing the work of people's hands [*Пожертва Богам*]; 4. The mode of Holy Silence and unification with the Gods [*Стан Священної Тиші*]; 5. Honouring the world of Prav – the Godly world [*Ушанування Світу Прав*]; 6. Honouring the world of Iav – the Earthly world [*Ушанування Світу Яв*]; 7. Honouring the World of Nav – the Underground world [*Ушанування Світу Нав*]; 8. Participants become filled with the light of Rod the Almighty [*Ладкування Яви - Живоявлення*]; 9. Sermon [*Проповідь*]; 10. Blessing of Water

[*Освячення Води*]; 11. Unification with Rod, creator of the Universe [*Єднання з Родом*]; each believer approaches the altar, addresses the Native Gods and drinks Holy Water. The ritual ends with all participants holding hands, walking around the fire and singing ritual songs. This ceremony lasts from approximately 40



Figure 2-1. Arseniia brings the sacrifice of milk to the Gods and Goddesses. April 28, 2007. Photo Taras Lesiv.

minutes to an hour, depending on the number of participants involved and the extent of the leader's improvisation.

Although Arseniia followed the general structure of *Svalennia* as presented in the *Service Book*, she still engaged in a great deal of improvisation. She began the presentation of

offerings to the Native Gods in the following address:

And now, when all our nearest Gods are here among us, let us bring them offerings from our spotless hearts, from our souls. This is the work of our hands from Mother-Earth. (Arseniia lifted up a cow's horn, filled with milk, that had been earlier placed on the shrine). It is Rod Almighty who created our Universe, placed in it the Milky Way. And we see in the star-filled sky, through which our planet travels, our cow, our Zamun', who feeds us and nourishes us on this earth! Let us join together in the milk of Mokosha, let our lives flow into this world like pure milk that nourishes us, as was given to us by the Gods...Accept this, our Gods! (Arseniia walked around the shrine and gradually poured milk onto the fire).²

This narrative and, in particular, the specific image of the cow referred to as *Zamun* will be discussed below. Both the cosmological belief system and spiritual practices of contemporary Ukrainian Pagans are very complex and highly structured, and include colourful imagery in the forms of old Slavic Gods and Goddesses and other spiritual beings. Contemporary Ukrainian Pagans communicate their beliefs through songs, poetry and a variety of weekly and calendar cycle rituals. They also actively conduct workshops and courses for those who are interested in their cosmology or, as Pagans often present it, in the worldview and wisdom of their Ancestors. “Where do they get this from?” is a question frequently posed by those who are amazed by the richness of Ukrainian Pagan practices and the complexity of their spiritual images.

Ukrainian Pagans draw upon a number of sources. Despite the great diversity of individual communities and the somewhat hostile relationships between particular groups and leaders, the majority of Ukrainian Pagans rely on the same sources, although in different ways and to varying degrees.³ It is beyond the scope of this study to provide an exhaustive list of all these materials. Instead, the focus here is on major categories of Pagan sources and their influence on contemporary Pagan discourse.

Ukrainian/Slavic Folklore

Ukrainian Paganism draws heavily upon folklore. The term “folklore” as originally understood in Europe is connected with peasant contexts. The use of this term has changed in North America, “where the peasant culture concept does

not fit the historical situation.” Instead, in North America, it is used in regards to the activity of distinct and identifiable regional, ethnic, religious, occupational or other groups (Yoder 1972: 295).

In contemporary Ukraine, the term “folk” [народний] is still applied predominantly to village (peasant) lore in both past and present settings. Ukrainian Pagans search for remnants of the old pagan worldview in various folkloric forms. Influenced by the ideas of Romantic Nationalism, Pagans consider peasants to be the bearers of a “true” and “pure” Ukrainian identity since peasant societies are usually more conservative and reluctant to change than those in urban settings (cf. T. Shanin 1971: 11-19). Pagans are convinced that their ancestral culture has been rapidly dying out under the pressures of modernization, the hostile Soviet regime and the Christian church.

Don Yoder, while discussing peasant dress, points out that “[peasant] identity [i]s determined geographically,” expressing “locality, region, or province” (Yoder 1972: 295). Ukrainian folklore is closely tied to particular rural places. Each ethnographic region in Ukraine is characterized by unique cultural expressions: material culture, beliefs, calendar and life cycle rituals, customs, medicine, magic, as well as music, dance and oral genres such as stories, legends, myths, proverbs and others.

In the past, peasants were familiar predominantly with the traditions of their own villages or vicinities because of the relative isolation of peasant societies from each other and from urban centers. Only scholars who conducted research in rural settings throughout Ukraine were aware of the great regional

diversity of village traditions. Today this information is available to a much wider audience because of the ease of travel and access to published ethnographic research. With the availability of information about folk traditions from various regions of Ukraine, Pagans select particular elements they find appealing and adapt them to their own needs.

Ukrainian Pagans make use of many academic materials devoted to rural culture. Among the works of early Ukrainian and Russian ethnographers, folklorists and anthropologists, Pagans utilize studies by Afanas'iev (2002 [1865-1869]); Vovk (1899, 1908, 1916); Hnatiuk (1914); Potebnia (1865); Sumtsov (1886, 1890, 1891); Chubinskii (1872-1877); Shukhevych (1902); Shcherbakivs'kyi (1937) and others. A younger generation of scholars includes Balushok (1998), Bulashev (1992), Veletskaiia (1978), Humeniuk (1962), Ilarion (1992 [1965]), Kylymnyk (1955-1965), and Rybakov (1981, 1988), among others. In addition to previously published sources, many present-day Ukrainian Pagans actively conduct their own folkloric research in contemporary villages.

Although these sources provide rich ethnographic accounts, they also represent various biases in their interpretation. The biases are the result of authors' personal views, political and religious convictions, as well as particular schools of thought. All these factors must be considered since it is not only ethnographic findings that shape the development of Ukrainian Paganism but also their interpretation. Selected works will be addressed in greater detail below to illustrate this point.

Archeological/Old Cultures: Aryan, Trypillian, Scythian, old Slavic

While building their contemporary spiritualities and identities, Ukrainian Pagans draw upon the distant past and rely on various materials connected with those cultures that had, or are believed to have had, some relationship to the territory of contemporary Ukraine. Sources that provide information about these previous eras can be distinguished as either **primary** and **secondary** materials. Primary sources are represented by archeological findings (particular physical objects and their remains) and/or written texts from a given period. Secondary sources represent either scholarly or popular interpretations of primary materials, both texts and physical objects.

a) Aryan culture

Ukrainian Pagans often refer to the “Aryan” Vedic civilization. The term “Aryan Race” was first used by the German philologist Max Müller, who proposed that there was a people called the Aryans who invaded and settled India, and developed the Vedic Religion and the oldest Indo-European language, Sanskrit (Waradpande 2000 [1989]: 1). According to Müller, the term “Arya” means “noble,” “of a good family” (Waradpande 2000 [1989]: 2). Although Müller originally viewed the Aryans as a race, he later began to regard them primarily in linguistic terms, as the people who spoke a language that became the basis for Sanskrit (Waradpande 2000 [1989]: 1). While comparing certain roots of Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Gothic, Celtic, Slavonic, Romanic and Anglo-Saxon languages, Müller came to the conclusion that “the words which have as nearly as possible

the same form and meaning in all the languages must have existed before the people who afterwards formed the prominent nationalities on the Aryan family, separated...” (Müller 1877: 273). On the basis of his linguistic analysis, Müller portrays the Aryan people in the following way:

It can be proved by the evidence of language, that before their separation the Aryans led the life of agricultural nomads [...]. They knew the arts of ploughing, of making roads, of building ships, of weaving and sewing, of erecting houses; they had counted at least as far as one hundred. They had domesticated the most important animals, the cow, the horse, the sheep, the dog; they were acquainted with the most useful metals, and armed with hatchets, whether for peaceful or war-like purposes. They had recognized the bonds of blood and the laws of marriage; they followed their leaders and kings, and the distinction between right and wrong was fixed by customs and laws. They were impressed with the idea of a Divine Being, and they invoked it by various names. (Müller 1877: 274)

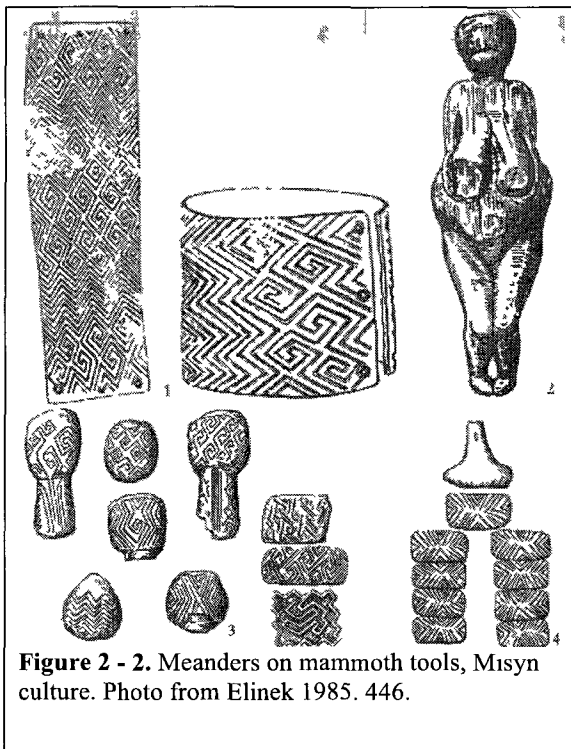
Müller’s interpretations became instrumental for further development of a multidimensional Aryan discourse. The idea of Aryan civilization became a tool for European cultures to “distinguish themselves from the biblically-based history of the Semitic peoples.” The Aryan-Semite dichotomy allowed many intellectuals of the 19th century to project “their own favored and unfavored traits” (Ivakhiv 2005a: 11; Arvidsson 2006: 310). The term “Aryan” acquired a negative connotation after it was applied by the ideologists of the Third Reich. However, prior to that, “non-Germanocentric forms of Ariosofy” circulated in Eastern and Central Europe and, in fact, became very powerful in the first attempts to revive Slavic paganism in Ukraine in the 1930s (Ivakhiv 2005a: 11).

Today the “Aryan race” is recognized as a myth within contemporary Western scholarly discourse.⁴ By contrast, the existence of Aryans in the past is

not questioned by contemporary Ukrainian Pagans who view themselves as Aryans' direct descendants. Pagans often refer to Indian Vedas, where they believe that the wisdom of Aryans is presented (see, for example, Lozko 2005b: 231-35 and Stupnikov 2001).

b) Mizyn (Mezyn) Culture

Mizyn (Mezyn) hunting culture dates back to the late Paleolithic era (60th – 15th



millennia BC). It is associated with a settlement that was discovered near the village of Mizyn in the Chernihiv region, Ukraine. Notable examples of Mizyn material culture are houses built on foundations of mammoth bones as well as bone and stone objects decorated with meander-like designs (Zabolotnyi 1966: 9) (Fig. 2-2).⁵ Ukrainian

Pagans, especially RUNVira followers, heavily draw upon Mizyn culture. For example, the meander is one of the most important symbols of this group.

b) Trypillian culture

Trypillian civilization (aka Cucuteni in Romania) is a Neolithic

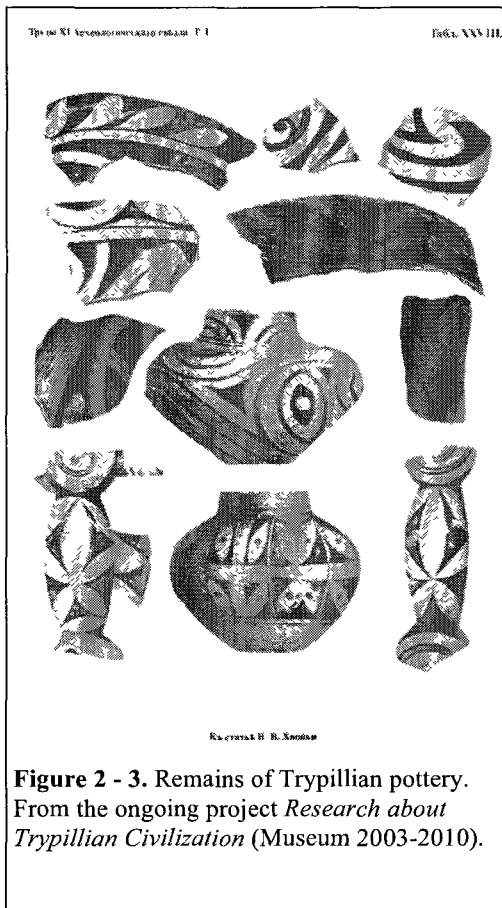


Figure 2 - 3. Remains of Trypillian pottery. From the ongoing project *Research about Trypillian Civilization* (Museum 2003-2010).

archeological culture that existed on the territory of present-day Ukraine. It was discovered in the late 19th century during archeological excavations led by Vikentii Khvoika. Khvoika named this finding after the village of Trypillia in the Kyiv region where his excavations took place (Passek 1941: 3). The excavations suggest that Trypillians were agricultural tribes that settled on the territory of present-day Ukraine, in particular, in the areas of Naddnistrov'ia and Naddniprov'ia (Dnister-Dnipro region) in the 3rd-2nd

millennia BC (cf. Passek 1941: 3). Other archeologists argue that the oldest remains of Trypillian culture can be dated as far back as the second half of the 5th millennium BC (cf. Burdo and Videiko 2008: 13).

Trypillian culture is known for various remains of material objects including settlements, two-story dwellings, and especially clay objects such as pottery and ceramic figurines. All are richly decorated with abstract geometric as well as anthropomorphic and zoomorphic designs (Fig.2-3). It is not only

contemporary Ukrainian Pagans who are greatly interested in Trypillian culture. This civilization has also attracted the attention of the larger Ukrainian society. The research begun by Khvoika was continued during the Soviet era, and numerous publications devoted to Trypillian civilization began appearing after the 1930-1940s (Zbenovich 1989). Trypillian culture continues to interest contemporary scholars, especially in post-Soviet Ukraine. A great variety of academic sources (ethnographic, art criticism, historical, anthropological, archeological, encyclopedic, etc.) on various aspects of Trypillian culture and the historiography of research devoted to it have been published in Ukraine and in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁶

The remnants of Trypillian culture are widely represented in museums, including the Kyiv Regional Archeological Museum,⁷ the National Historic and Cultural Preservation Centre “Trypillian Culture” in the Cherkasy region,⁸ and the Archeological museum of the Institute of Archeology of the Academy of Sciences of Ukraine.⁹ Trypillian culture is a focus not only for Ukrainians in Ukraine but also for those in the diaspora. For example, largely due to the initiative of the diaspora, a large exhibit of Trypillian artifacts was displayed at the Royal Ontario Museum in Canada in 2008.

Ukrainian Pagans perceive Trypillians as their ancestors. Pagan leaders study the remains of Trypillian artifacts, striving to understand Trypillians’ cosmology and spirituality (see, for example, Lozko 2006: 274-282).

c) *Scythian culture*

Ukrainian Pagans also often refer to Scythian tribal culture, which dates from the 7th-3rd centuries BC (see, for example, Lozko 2005b: 42-43). Scythian tribes settled on the terrain of present-day Ukraine and Russia among other lands. In Ukraine, they occupied the territory adjacent to the Black sea. In particular, they settled from the Danube in the west to the Don in the east and, as far north as present-day Kyiv. At certain periods in Scythian history, their territory extended far beyond these boundaries (Rolle 1980: 11).

Scythian culture is richly represented through its burial mounds called *mohyly* or *kurhany*, that can reach the height of a three-storey building and are 100 meters in diameter at the base (Rolle 1980:19). Through numerous excavations of these mounds, human and animal skeletons and the remains of

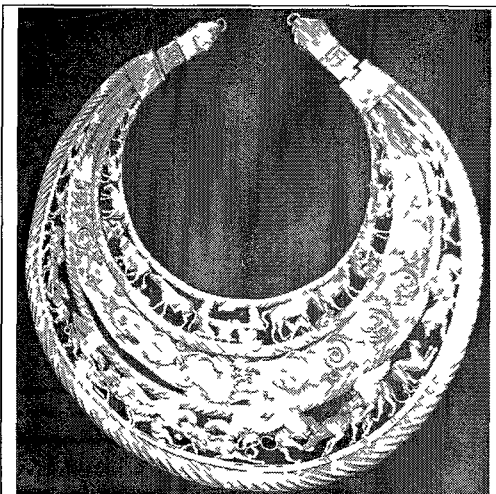


Figure 2 - 4. Scythian Pectoral, 4th-century B C It is currently preserved in the Museum of Historical Treasures in Kyiv (From cover of the journal *Nauka i zhizn* [*Наука и жизнь*], September, 1971)

material objects were found. These findings shed some light on the lifestyle and worldview of the Scythians. In addition, there are written documents describing this culture. One of the best known sources is the written impression of the Greek historian Herodotus, who traveled across this area in the 5th century BC. Herodotus described the climate, customs and traditions of these people

and even wrote about their origins. Although western scholars question the accuracy of Herodotus' historical accounts, his works serve as a significant source of reference for many Ukrainian Pagans.¹⁰

Scythians were known as great warriors. Their material culture is especially renowned in Ukraine for the spectacular jewelry pieces found in archeological excavations. One of the most famous examples of jewelry is known as the Scythian Pectoral that is dated to the 4th-century B.C (Fig. 2-4). It was discovered in the *kurgan Tovsta Mohyla*, in the Dnipropetrovsk region, Ukraine.

This Pectoral consists of three layers. The bottom layer presents a battle between horses, griffins and beasts. The middle layer is decorated with floral motifs (flowers and branches) and birds. The uppermost layer depicts scenes of everyday life: two bare-chested bearded men sewing clothing from sheep skin, their long-bows lying beside them; a young man milking a sheep; horses and cows walking and birds flying.

d) Old Slavic Culture

The last major source for Ukrainian Paganism is pre-Christian Slavic culture. There are many written records dealing with old Slavs. These are represented mostly by historical chronicles and church documents that contain some information about the pre-Christian Slavic mythological pantheon. The lack of pagan sources on pre-Christian beliefs, especially the rituals and services connected with them, can be attributed to the illiteracy of the old Slavs. At that

time only Christian monks could write, but it would have been considered unacceptable for them to focus on such “ungodly” matters (Hnatiuk 1912: vi).

One of the major records of the life and history of old Slavs is the Primary Chronicle *Tale of Bygone Years* [*Повість минулих літ*]. This document was compiled in the early 12th century and covers the period of time between 850 and 1110. Since the form of many parts of its text resembles that of legends, it may have been adapted from oral tradition. However, there is no direct evidence to support this idea (Kononenko 2007: 7).

The Primary Chronicle provides some information about old Slavic beliefs, although indirectly. For example, it includes references to beliefs in the description of Prince Oleh’s campaign to Constantinople in 907. The Greeks, frightened by his forces, offered Oleh a peace treaty (Blyznets’ 1982: 28-9). The Chronicle mentions that while swearing oaths to seal this treaty, the Greek kings kissed the cross while Oleh and his warriors “swore with their weapons and *Perun*, their god, and *Veles*, god of cattle” (Blyznets’ 1982: 29).¹¹

Slightly more explicit information about the Slavic pantheon is provided in the *Primary Chronicle* in the section devoted to the period of Prince Volodymyr the Great. Having conquered his brother Iaropolk, Volodymyr centralized his power in Kyiv. In 980, eight years before he Christianized Kyivan Rus’, Volodymyr undertook a pagan religious reform, establishing a shrine near his palace. The *Primary Chronicle* provides the names of those deities that Volodymyr chose for his shrine and some information about their function. In

addition, it also includes some mention of how these spiritual beings were visualized by the old Slavs:

He [Volodymyr] placed wooden gods on the mountain behind his palace. *Perun*, god of lightning and thunder, had a silver head and golden mustache. Then [came] *Khors*... After him – *Volos* – protector of cattle and trades, and also *Dazhboh* and *Stryboh*, who kept the sky and wind in their hands. Next to them, he placed *Symarhl* and *Mokosha*. It was *Mokosha*, whom sorceresses and *zhrytsi* (priestesses) came to worship. (Blyznets' 1982: 64-6)

Another written source dealing with the period of the early Slavs is the epic poem *The Lay of Ihor's Campaign* [Слово про Ігорів похід]. The story behind this poem is shrouded in mystery. *The Lay* is believed by some to have been written in the 14th century, although it describes the events of a much earlier time. In particular, it is devoted to the campaign of Prince Ihor against the Polovtsi in 1085. The manuscript of this work was acquired by a collector of Russian antiquities, Count Alexei Musin-Pushkin, in the late 18th century (Likhachev 1981: 9). The original manuscript was destroyed along with Musin-Pushkin's entire collection in a fire in 1812, and only copies of this text, and its original translation into modern Russian, have survived (Likhachev 1981: 10).

In academic circles, *The Lay* is widely perceived as a forgery. One hypothesis is that it is a literary text of the late 18th century (see Keenan 2003). However, folklorists find *The Lay* interesting as a text with many similarities to oral epic poetry (Kononenko 2007: 12). A bard called Boian and his artistic talent are praised in this text (Kononenko 2007: 12). *The Lay* also contains brief references to the old Slavic pantheon. For example, Boian is addressed as the grandson of *Veles* (Ryl's'kyi 1974: 13).

Among the primary sources dealing with old Slavic beliefs are also Church texts, which often include edicts against pagan practices. The following is an example from the *Poucheniia* [Teachings] of the 11-12th centuries:

Those [peasants of Kyivan Rus] call rivers goddesses, and make sacrifices to the animals that live in them...Others bow to the mud and wells...and the fires, and the rocks, and the rivers, and the springs, and make sacrifices to *berehyni* [likely water nymphs in this context]. (Quoted in Humenna 1978: 206)

To Ukrainian Pagans, references to old Slavic paganism in primary sources serve as an important foundation for further interpretations of their ancestors' cosmology and spirituality.

In contrast to the sources that provide brief, indirect references to old Slavic mythology and spirituality, *The Book of Veles* [Велесова книга] deals with this topic more explicitly. Many people believe this book was originally written in the form of runes on wooden planks. However, the location of these planks is unknown. Only their transcriptions are available. While the book is devoted to a very early time, possibly as early as the seventh century BC, it was first discovered in the early 20th century on the territory of contemporary Ukraine, near Kharkiv. A majority of East European and Western academics treat *The Book of Veles* as a forgery.¹² In contrast, many contemporary Slavic Pagans regard it as a major sacred text. However, although the text resembles the old East Slavic language, there are many disagreements between its various (including Pagan) translators. This problem will be later addressed in greater detail.

There are also physical objects that represent old Slavic culture. One of the best known findings connected with this era is the so called Zbruch idol, found in 1848 in the Zbruch River in the Ternopil' region of Ukraine (Fig.2-5). It is a four-faced stone statue, which is over two and a half meters long. What attracts the viewer's attention to this idol are the various visual images engraved on it. The whole composition is divided into several layers. On the first (bottom) layer, three male heads are depicted. The second layer includes four stylized human figures with outstretched hands. The images of a horse and a sword are depicted on the top layer. The upper part of this composition is represented by four heads looking in four different directions and covered with one hat. In addition, the hands of this creature are depicted in different positions. This statue has provoked interesting interpretations at both the scholarly and popular level, as will be described below.

Secondary Sources on Old/Archeological Cultures

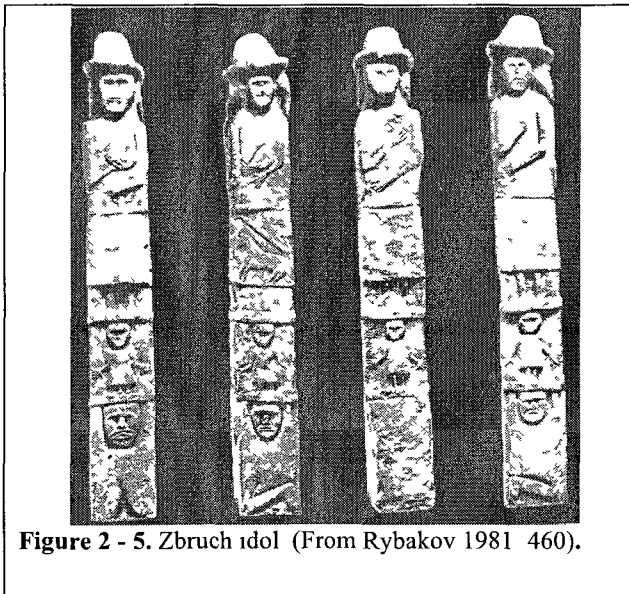


Figure 2 - 5. Zbruch idol (From Rybakov 1981 460).

Both archeological findings and primary texts shed some light on pre-Christian beliefs and customs of present-day Ukraine. However, as illustrated above, the texts provide only obscure fragments of the past rather

than its full image. The past can also be reconstructed, to a very limited degree, with the help of archeological findings. While we can examine the form of artifacts excavated on Slavic territories, these objects do not carry any inscriptions that would help understand their exact function and meaning in the past. Nevertheless, bygone eras attract curious minds. As a result, a great variety of secondary sources devoted to the past have appeared in print in both Ukraine and the Ukrainian diaspora.

Such sources present translations and interpretations of primary materials, both texts and physical objects. On the basis of the authors' approaches, methodologies, styles and views, these works can be divided into three major categories: academic publications, popular works, and those sources that belong to what Andrian Ivakhiv calls "alternative" scholarship (Ivakhiv 2005a: 7). This scholarship is produced predominantly, but not exclusively, by those people who identify themselves as Pagans. These three categories of secondary sources often overlap. Let us first discuss each category based on particular examples and then focus on those characteristics that the categories sometimes share in common.

a) Academic Sources

Academic sources that interpret old/archeological cultures on the territory of present-day Ukraine present various levels of objectivity. For example, ethnographer and folklorist Volodymyr Hnatiuk, while discussing old Slavic mythology, relies exclusively on his ethnographic research and is very critical of

any mythological interpretations that are not based on empirical evidence (Hnatiuk 1912: vii).

Metropolitan Ilarion, while hypothesizing about Slavic beliefs, also admits that a lack of primary information does not allow for any absolute statements regarding the old Slavic worldview. Even the general form of old Slavic religion, specifically the existence of beliefs in a supreme god, is under question, since the primary information available can be interpreted in different ways (Ilarion 1965: 95). To illustrate these difficulties, Ilarion provides two examples from the *Primary Chronicle*. Prince Ihor's treaty with the Greeks (944-945) includes the statement that if anyone breaks its terms "they will be cursed by God, and by *Perun*" (Ilarion 1965: 95).¹³ As another example, Prince Sviatoslav's oath regarding his peace treaty with the Greeks (971) contains the following: "May we be cursed by god, in him we trust, in *Perun*, and in *Veles*, the god of cattle" (Ilarion 1965: 95).¹⁴ As Ilarion points out, the phrase "by god" is not really clear because it can be understood to mean not only a pagan god but also the Christian God (Ilarion 1965: 95). It is worthwhile to point out that Ilarion quotes the original text written in Old Church Slavonic. Interestingly, Victor Blyznets,' in his Ukrainian translation of this text suggests, through the use of specific linguistic turns and punctuations, that Sviatoslav implies exclusively pagan gods: "...May we be cursed by god *Perun*, in whom we trust, and by *Veles*, the god of cattle..." (Blyznets 1982: 56).¹⁵ This example illustrates how translations can sometimes take away ambivalence and introduce questionably accurate clarity.

Furthermore, as Ilarion traces through primary sources, the pre-Christian beliefs of the old Slavs also changed over time, replacing some deities with others (Ilarion 1965: 97). Other scholars argue that these beliefs were also territorialized. For example, the Russian linguists Ivanov and Toporov find that the cult of *Perun* dominated in the southern areas of the Eastern Slavic territories while *Volos* was worshiped predominantly in the northern parts (Ivanov and Toporov 1974: 55, 62).

While some scholars limit themselves in their interpretations regarding those aspects of the past that cannot be verified, others hypothesize more extensively. Often, scholarly interpretations of old Slavic mythology and archeological cultures present different biases, either personal or connected with a particular school of thought. The European mythological school of folklore of the 19th century is one such school. Although its ideas and methods have been challenged and are no longer followed in Western academic circles, it continues to contribute to Slavic scholarship. One of the earlier representatives of this school is the famous Russian linguist Aleksandr Afanas'iev. In his three-volume work *Poetic Views of the Slavs towards Nature* [*Поэтические воззрения славян на природу*] (2002 [1865-1869]), he attempts to not only interpret the data available but also to trace the origins of Slavic mythology, analyzing verbally transmitted lore (riddles, sayings and beliefs) about nature and the supernatural with the help of a comparative geographic method.

The Soviet scholar Boris Rybakov provided hypothetical interpretations of many archeological findings on Slavic territories that were also somewhat in line

with the mythological school. (His interpretations of the past largely resonate with those of Marija Gimbutas). The following is an excerpt from his discussion of the Zbruch idol:

All the...composition can be encoded in the following way: the middle world (world of people) is inhabited by people (men, women and children). It is possible that they are depicted here performing a ritual dance. A mustached god holds up the earth while kneeling. This is probably *Veles*, the universal [всенародный] god of cattle and wealth, connected with the earth and harvest. The upper layer represents the heavens...(Rybakov 1981: 463).

Rybakov also makes a parallel between the symbolisms of earth and human fertility. Many Trypillian clay figurines found during archeological excavations are covered with particular designs. Among these designs is a rhombus divided into four sections with the help of intersecting lines, with each section containing a small dot (Fig. 10-8, Chapter X). Rybakov views this composition as a symbol of a sown field, where the square represents the field while the dots signify seeds. These statuettes often also have two stylized snakes, symbolizing water and rain, depicted on their female breasts. (Since snakes usually come out at the time of rain, Rybakov traces a close symbolic connection between the humidity of the heavens and snakes in Trypillian pottery (Rybakov 1981: 170)). According to Rybakov, the designs on these figurines express various fertility-related ideas: prosperity of sown fields; watering of a field as a basic necessity for its fertility; and well-being of a child in its mother's womb (Rybakov 1981: 179). Although these and many of Rybakov's other interpretations of the pre-Christian Slavic worldview are thought-provoking, they

do not really fit contemporary Western scholarly discourse since they cannot be verified. In contrast, Rybakov's ideas often shape the Ukrainian Pagan worldview.

Political convictions can also play a significant role in scholarly interpretations of old cultures. For example, in the 19th century context of European Romanticism and ethnic nationalism, the romantic view of folkloric materials as ancient relics that manifest the “primordial” origins of a particular nation was popular and acceptable in the academic circles. While today such approaches are largely considered outdated and biased, especially by Western academics, 19th century romantic and nationalist ideas continue to inspire many folklorists and ethnographers in Ukraine. For example, such sentiments are reflected in Oleksa Voropai's *The Customs of Our People* [Звичаї нашого народу] (1958). Voropai provides an extensive ethnographic description of folk rituals and beliefs, often trying to trace their pre-Christian origins. In line with the ideas of 19th century Romantic Nationalism, he believes that these customs are the foundation that unites people into one nation:

...the customs of our people [settled on different territories] have a lot in common. Who knows, maybe it is this similarity of our customs that is the cementing medium that, with the help of its strength, overcomes all the forces that work towards destroying the unity of our people. (Voropai 1958, vol.1.: 11)¹⁶

Although some secondary academic sources may be less reliable than others in terms of their objectivity, they have a very significant influence on the development of popular discourse about old Slavic mythology. For example, it is rare to find a popular work devoted to pre-Christian beliefs and practices in present-day Ukraine in which Boris Rybakov is not cited.

b) Popular Sources

Popular interest in Old Slavic mythology has been especially active, not only among the individuals who identify themselves as Pagans, but also in the wider social context. There are many reasons behind the attempt to reconstruct the old Slavic past. Frequently these reasons, especially those dealing with nationalist sentiments, coincide with the views of some scholars. Popular works also often deal with romanticizing and idealizing the old Slavic past.

One of the themes in popular works devoted to Slavic mythology is connected with the notion of resistance to global technological progress. This theme is similar to that of European and North American Paganism, where it is believed that life in harmony with nature, as it is understood to have existed in the past, is being destroyed by the forces of modernity. For some Ukrainians, the rediscovery of their old roots is also a mode of resistance to globalization and urbanization. For example, the famous popular ethnographer Vasyl' Skurativs'kyi demonstrates his great concern regarding these matters. His works are devoted to Ukrainian pre-Christian beliefs, some of which still have echoes in rural areas today. Skurativs'kyi romantically portrays the village as a place full of colourful customs and rituals, which are profound, nature-friendly and aesthetically pleasing manifestations of ancestral wisdom. In contrast, Skurativs'kyi views the city as the carrier of technological progress that, in turn, leads to the spiritual regression of the Ukrainian people. This is why he sees a necessity for urbanized Ukrainian people to go back to their rural roots (Skurativs'kyi 1987).

c) *Alternative Scholarship*

While addressing “alternative scholarship,” Ivakhiv does not provide an explicit definition for this trend, implying only that such works do not fit into mainstream Western scholarly discourse because of their biases. Many of these works are connected with the discipline of *narodoznavstvo* [the study of the people], which has become very popular in Ukraine since the 1990s. It was widely introduced in institutions at all educational levels, from primary schools to universities, as a compulsory subject of the curriculum (Shostak 1999: 90).

Natalia Shostak critically describes the main characteristics of this discipline:

In many instances, its methodology is borrowed from folklore and ethnography, while its main purpose is the popularization of folk culture rather than any extended theoretical analysis. Its reappearance strengthens a neo-romantic, neo-idealistic stance in which folklore becomes defined as national pride and national property. (Shostak 1999: 90)

The subject of *narodoznavstvo* was a state project connected with the development of national consciousness at the time when the Soviet myth had shattered with the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was supposed to contribute to the construction of a distinct national identity. Ukrainian *narodoznavstvo* was fully accepted by some politically engaged scholars. Although it is no longer a part of the school curriculum, *narodoznavstvo* shaped popular nationalist consciousness and contributed to the Pagan discourse in a profound way.

In addition to the field of *narodoznavstvo*, there are many individual works of “alternative scholarship” that are often easily recognizable by their titles. Among them is Stepan Nalyvaiko’s *Ukrains’ka Indoarika* [Ukrainian Indo-Aryan

World] that ambitiously attempts to show that “the Ukrainian language and spiritual culture reach back many millennia” and that “Ukrainian history was created simultaneously with the histories of the most ancient civilizations of the world” (2007:4). To provide another example, O. O. Chaichenko’s *Ukry-arii: Doslidzhennia rodovodu ukrainsiv* [Ukr-Aryans: Study of the evolution of the Ukrainian people] “addresses the cosmic images and symbols of various cultural traditions in their relationship to esoteric and Vedic knowledge, comparing them with similar Ukrainian elements and showing their common origin” (Chaichenko 2003: 4).

It can sometimes be difficult to draw a line between various types of secondary sources - academic, popular or “alternative scholarship” - since they may overlap in various dimensions. For example, many Ukrainian scholars view themselves as nation builders and their idealized interpretations of Ukraine’s past are needed to provide socio-spiritual help in the context of the Post-Soviet identity crisis. To them, the romantic ideas of the 19th century or the mythological school of folklore studies are inspiring and continue to present a relevant framework. “Alternative scholarship,” in turn, while borrowing many ideas and methodologies from both contemporary and 19th century scholarship, overlaps with popular interpretations of the distant past.

The Book of Veles

The Book of Veles deserves separate attention. While this source is largely perceived as a forgery in Western and East European academic circles, it is the

most popular “primary” source for contemporary Ukrainian Pagans. They view *The Book of Veles* as the fullest account on the spirituality of their ancestors.

In this study, *The Book of Veles* will be treated as the sacred text of Ukrainian Pagans rather than as a historical document. However, it is interesting that the text that Pagans consider their most complete source of historical information is difficult to understand. The language of the original text resembles old East Slavic mixed with some elements from contemporary Russian, Ukrainian and Polish. While *The Book of Veles* has been translated many times into both contemporary Ukrainian, Russian and English, there is much dissimilarity between various translations. For example, plank 7-G of *The Book of Veles* includes the phrase *kravu zamun'* [краву замунь] (accusative case). When translating into contemporary Ukrainian (and English), some individuals read the term *kravu* as *krov*, meaning blood. In his English translation, Victor Kachur presents the following version: “...Dazhbo [Dazhboh] had given us [old Slavs] birth through the unity of blood...” (Kachur 1973: Board 7-G). Mykola Skrypnyk translates it into literary Ukrainian as “...we [old Slavs] are the descendants of Dazhba [Dazhboh] who gave birth to us through blood *zamun'* [this word is not translated, just transliterated]...” (Skrypnyk 1968, part 3: 11). In contrast, both Serhii Piddubnyi (2007a) and Halyna Lozko (2007a) provide another translation that, in turn, changes the entire meaning of the line. They interpret the word *kravu* as *korova*, meaning cow. Both agree that it is the sacred cow Zamun' that is mentioned in this passage. In particular, Halyna Lozko's translation of the excerpt is: “Dazhboh gave us [old Slavs] birth through the cow [called] Zamun'...”

(Lozko 2007a: 159). In her commentary regarding this line, Lozko refers to it as a remnant of totemic symbolism based on the myth about the cow Zamun' who gave birth to old Slavic tribes. Thus while Kachur and Skrypnyk connect the phrase *kravu zamun'* to the concept of blood and blood relationship, Lozko and Piddubnyi introduce a completely different image – the mythological cow called Zamun'.

It is important to understand that in this case we are dealing not simply with agreements or disagreements between particular individuals. The popular discourse on the reading of *The Book of Veles* results in new ideology and cultural expressions. As illustrated at the beginning of this Chapter, Lozko and Piddubnyi's hypotheses about the cow Zamun' have found their way into a contemporary Pagan spiritual worldview communicated through the ritual of *Slavlennia*.

It is beyond the scope of this study to prove or disprove any Pagan interpretations of the past, including the translations of *The Book of Veles*. What is more important is the way contemporary Ukrainian Pagans embrace the past and speculate about it in the process of the construction of their present-day identities and spiritualities.

“Cultic Milieu” and Psychology

Some (but not all) Ukrainian Pagans employ the esoteric practices of “cultic milieu.” The concept of “cultic milieu” was first introduced by Colin Campbell to describe “the worlds of the occult and the magical, of spiritualism and psychic

phenomena, of mysticism and new thought, of alien intelligences and lost civilizations, of faith healing and nature cure" (Campbell 1972: 122). "Cultic milieu" surrounding Ukrainian Paganism represents "the cultural context and seedbed within which the ideas and practices of unorthodox or non-mainstream religious groups develop, mix, and spread" (Ivakhiv 2005a: 9). Among these unorthodox and non-mainstream ideas, one can find influences of Eastern mysticism and Western esotericism, especially in their relationships to health and wellness of a human being.

Some Ukrainian Pagans are also inspired by the achievements in the areas of psychology that they adapt to their Pagan needs. Like Western New Agers, Ukrainian Pagans draw upon the concepts of Carl Jung and, in particular, they are interested in Jungian psychological typology. This typology is an attempt to categorize people on the basis of the different functions of human consciousness. Jungian types include Extraverted Sensation, Introverted Sensation, Extraverted Intuition, Introverted Intuition, Extraverted Thinking, Introverted Thinking, Extraverted Feeling and Introverted Feeling (Jung 1971). These psychological types later formed the basis of the field of socionics introduced by Aushra Augustinavichute (who eventually shortened her last name to "Augusta") in Lithuania:

Socionics is a theory of human interaction based on fixed patterns of information processing known as 'socionic types.' A socionic type (there are 16 of them) is a description of some very fundamental ways in which a person's psyche works. These psychic qualities define to a large degree a person's relationship with others, his or her perception of life as a whole, and the niche he or she strives to occupy among people.¹⁷

Socionics is little known in the West. In contrast, it has grown into a field that attracts a great amount of attention on both the professional and popular level in many parts of the former Soviet Union, including Ukraine. Some Ukrainian Pagans adapt socionics while theorizing about human relationships and the compatibility of different types, especially when building a family. Individuals who are well acquainted with both “cultic milieu” discourse and the field of socionics are usually viewed as possessing special knowledge [знання]. Most often, the bearers of this knowledge are the leaders of Ukrainian Paganism.

The above discussion illustrates that the existing primary data about the past is obscure and fragmentary. It is important to “filter” Pagan sources while studying their contemporary beliefs and practices in the “cultic milieu” context. The filters through which these sources can be read reveal many layers of influences and meanings that are often as interesting as the old spiritual beliefs and practices themselves.

¹ If not otherwise indicated, all translations from Ukrainian and Russian are by the author. Normally, only the first word of a sentence and proper nouns are capitalized in Ukrainian and Russian. However, contemporary East-European Pagans often capitalize those terms that have a special significance to them (e.g., Ancestral, Native, etc). In this work, I capitalize such terms when either transliterating or translating them from the original language.

² І ось тепер, коли всі Боги наші найближчі є поруч з нами, най принесемо ми їм по жертви наші від світлого серця нашого, від душі нашої. Це праця рук наших від Землі-Матінки. Це Род Всевишній створив Всесвіт наш, вклавши його Молочним Шляхом, і бачимо ми в небі зоряному, по якому йде земля наша, корова наша, Замунь наша, яка годує нас і живить нас на цій землі! Най поєднаємося ми з молоком Мокошанським, хай життя наше в світі цьому ллється, як покладено Богами, молоком чистим, яке ситить життя наше. Прийміть, Боги!

³ My findings connected with the sources of contemporary Ukrainian Pagan beliefs and practices largely match those of Adrian Ivakhiv. In his list of materials contributing to the development of Paganism in Ukraine, Ivakhiv includes the following: 1 Folkloristics and ethnography, 2 The Study of Ukrainian and old Slavic history and prehistoric times, “speculative or ‘alternative archeology,’ including astroarcheology” that deals with the decoding of various old signs and markings and contributes to the discourse about direct affiliation of contemporary Ukrainians with old cultures, in particular, the Trypillian, Scythian and “Aryan” eras, works devoted to “controversial texts such as the *Book of Veles*,” 3 Activities of the Ukrainian Pagan diaspora groups, especially the works of Lev Sylenko, Volodymyr Shaian and their adherents, 4

Contemporary “cultic milieu” context that introduces a variety of non-traditional, “non-mainstream” and “unorthodox” ideas and practices (See Ivakhiv’s 2005a 8-10) I expand on his discussion and categorize these sources in a slightly different way

⁴ For a very critical discussion of the Aryan myth, especially Muller’s ideas, see Waradpande 2000 [1989], where the author strongly argues that the Aryan invasion is a linguistic theory and not a historical fact See also Stefan Arvidsson 2006 Among other works discussing the Aryan myth and its implications in various contexts see also Olender 1992, Figueira 2002, Poliakov 1974

⁵ For detailed information about the Mizyn culture see I H Shovkoplias 1965 See also S N Bibikov 2008

⁶ For example, see Balabina 1998, Novokhat’ko 2004, Tkachuk 2005, Videiko and Cherniakhov 2003, Videiko 2002, and many others

⁷ Zapovednik 2006

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Arkheolohichnyi muzei 2006

¹⁰ Contemporary scholars often regard Herodotus as both “father of history” and “father of lies” (cf Evans 1968) He is often criticised for his biases and for providing inaccurate accounts or interpretations of historical events For critical discussions of Herodotus’ works and methodology see, among others, Detlev 1989

¹¹ “клялись своєю зброєю і Перуном, своїм богом, і Велесом, богом худоби ”

¹² For a summary of the history of the discovery of *The Book of Veles* and its subsequent publications in Russia, see Shnirelman 2008 For a discussion of its popular acceptance in Ukraine and specifically by Ukrainian Pagans, see Ivakhiv 2005a 11-14 For a detailed contextual and linguistic analyses of *The Book of Veles* as a forgery, see Tvorogov 1988 100, and Tvorogov 1990 See also Zhukovskaia 1960 143, and Kaganskaya 1986 3-27

¹³ “Да будетъ клят от Бога, і от Перуна ”

¹⁴ “Да імієм клятву от бога, в єго же віруєм, в Перуна, і в Волоса, скотья бога ”

¹⁵ “Хай будемо прокляті від бога, в якого віруємо, – Перуна і Волоса, бога худоби ”

¹⁶ Voropai refers to those periods of time, when the territory of contemporary Ukraine was divided under the rule of different political powers, including Poland, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Russian Empire and others For an English language history of Ukraine, see Subtelny 2000 [1988]

¹⁷ See “Introduction to Sociotics ”

CHAPTER III

Ukrainian Pagan Groups:

Organizational History, Ideology and Spirituality

Origins and Development of Ukrainian Paganism: General Overview

The roots of Ukrainian Paganism are associated with its two founding leaders. Volodymyr Shaian made the first step in reviving old Slavic paganism in Ukraine in the mid-1930s, drawing upon the idea of Aryan origin popular at that time (Ivakhiv 2005a: 11). Because of his nationalist sentiments, Shaian was forced to flee Ukraine during WWII. Prior to his departure for Western Europe in 1943, he established the **Order of the Knights of the Solar God** [Орден Лицарів Бога Сонця] as a semi-religious and semi-political organization. His intention was to make this group a part of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) in order to assist in the struggle against Soviet Red Army. (There is no indication that this group continued to exist in the context of post-war Soviet Ukraine). Upon leaving Ukraine, Shaian lived in European refugee camps where he formed a second contingent of the Order of the Knights of the Solar God. However, the majority of his followers eventually moved to North America and this group became inactive (Murovych 1987: 7-9). According to the followers of Shaian, one of the knights initiated was Lev Sylenko. Sylenko then allegedly split with his teacher, reformed Shaian's religious doctrine, and established the religion known as **Native Ukrainian National Faith** [Рідна Українська Національна Віра] commonly referred to as **RUNVira**. Anatolii Kolodnyi, a Ukrainian researcher of RUNVira, finds the details of this biographical episode contradictory. Some

sources focusing on Lev Sylenko and his teachings stress that Sylenko was never a student of Shaian, and boldly state that Sylenko never had need of teachers of this kind (Kolodnyi, Ch.1.).

Both Shaian and Sylenko shared the vision of the autonomy of Ukraine. They are also both known for their racist and anti-Semitic sentiments as well as their strong rejection of Christianity. However, despite sharing these convictions, these two leaders approach the ideas of both the pre-Christian past and of present-day spirituality in different ways. The main difference between their views pits polytheism against monotheism as the basis for a true Ukrainian spirituality. According to Shaian's religious doctrine, God is a manifold essence that appears through the images of various Slavic mythological deities. Shaian's followers believe in a number of diverse spiritual beings that are each in charge of particular natural forces and spheres of life. In contrast to Shaian's faith, Sylenko's religion is monotheistic. He proclaimed belief in one god, Dazhboh, the Sun-god in old Slavic mythology, as the basis for what he considered the true Ukrainian religion, and proclaimed himself as the Teacher and the Prophet of this faith.

Although Shaian is credited for making the first step towards the revival of old Slavic religion before and during WWII, because of Sylenko's efforts Ukrainian Paganism developed especially actively in the Ukrainian diaspora following WWII. Having immigrated to Canada, Sylenko organized the dynamic RUNVira movement that grew among the Ukrainian urban intelligentsia throughout the second half of the 20th century. During this period, RUNVira congregations were registered in several cities of the USA and Canada as well as

in Australia, England, Germany and New Zealand (Sylenko 1996a: 6). Shaian's ideas also continued to develop in the diaspora, though on a markedly smaller scale. His followers established small religious communities in Toronto and Hamilton, Ontario.

The role of the Western diaspora in the development of Paganism in Ukraine cannot not be overestimated. Pagan ideas began to reach Ukraine from the diaspora in the early 1980s (Shnirelman 2002: 201),¹ however, this movement did not begin to grow actively until after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In fact, the first Pagan organization (RUNVira) was officially registered in Kyiv soon after the declaration of Ukraine's independence from the Soviet Union (Sylenko 1996a: 6). As for Shaian's ideas, they form the basis for the **Native Faith Association of Ukraine** led by Kyiv-based Halyna Lozko.

Today, the Ukrainian Pagan movement in the diaspora continues to be represented predominantly by RUNVira. However, its membership is gradually declining. In contrast, Paganism is growing actively in Ukraine, where one can find a great variety of groups. According to a list generated in 2005, the predominant streams of Paganism included two branches of RUNVira: **The Association of Sons and Daughters of Ukraine RUNVira** [*Об'єднання Синів і Дочок України РУНВіра*] aka OSIDU RUNVira; and **The Association of Sons and Daughters RUNVira** [*Об'єднання Синів і Дочок РУНВіра*] aka OSID RUNVira. The same list noted other major groups such as the **Council of the Native Ukrainian Faith** [*Собор Рідної Української Віри*]; the **Ancestral Fire of the Native Orthodox Faith** [*Родове Вогнище Рідної Православної Віри*];

and **Native Faith** [*Рідна Віра*] united under the umbrella institution The Native Faith Association of Ukraine [*Об'єднання Рідновірів України*]. Among several smaller groups listed were the Kyiv-based **Trinity** [*Трійця*]; **Perun's Host** [*Перунова Рать*]; **Knights of the Order of the Sun** [*Лицарі Ордена Сонця*]; devotees of the goddess Berehynia as well as the more pan-Slavic Khara-Khors Slavic Vedic movement and the Zhytomyr-based **Great Fire** [*Великий Вогонь*] (Ivakhiv 2005a: 23).

We can now expand Ivakhiv's 2005 list to include many newly emerged groups and umbrella organizations. These include Vinnytsia-based **Native Orthodox Faith "Wreath of God"** [*Рідна Православна Віра "Вінець Бога"*]; the Zaporizhzhia-based **Rus' Spiritual Circle** [*Руське Православне Коло*]; **Brotherhood of Ukrainian Pagans "Svarha"** [*Братство Українських Язичників "Сварга"*], and others. The **Ukrainian Pagan Council** [*Віче Українських Рідновірів*], renamed the **Council of Ukrainian Customary Communities** [*Собор Українських Звичаєвих Громад*] in 2009, is a recently formed umbrella organization that unites several Pagan groups. These groups are not required to share the same ideology or spirituality. Rather, this organization was created to defend the common political interests of its members.²

Statistics

According to the Religious Information Service of Ukraine (RISU), as of January 1, 2009, RUNVira consisted of 50 officially registered communities, 41 priests, 3 Sunday schools and 3 periodicals. Under the entry "Other Pagan

Religious Organizations,” RISU provides the following numbers: 55 communities, 55 (Pagan) priests, 3 educational establishments with 21 fulltime and 79 part-time students, 8 Sunday schools and 3 periodicals.³

As in the case of Western Paganism, it is very difficult to obtain any exact numbers of Ukrainian Pagans. For example, in order to officially register a religious organization/congregation in Ukraine, that community must consist of at least 10 people at the time of registration. Thus, the number of congregations does not tell us much about the number of actual adherents. I observed Pagan gatherings all across Ukraine ranging from a few individuals to approximately two hundred people, especially on particular celebratory occasions.

Furthermore, considering that any official registration in Ukraine is often an exhausting bureaucratic procedure, some communities prefer to practice their spiritualities in private settings, without undergoing any official course of action. In the case of one RUNVira group I encountered in L’viv, several individuals gather for Sunday Holy Hour Services at one member’s apartment and do not plan to register their community officially.

Moreover, although Ukrainian Paganism is more structured and institutionalized than its Western counterpart, it is important to understand that not all the individuals who participate in Pagan activities belong officially to any Pagan congregation. People may be interested in Pagan culture but not willing to undergo any registration process. One may also encounter individuals who attend Pagan gatherings simply out of curiosity. Pagan leaders, in turn, usually claim greater numbers of adherents than they actually have.

Although it is impossible to gather exact numbers, the RISU statistics show that Paganism is actively growing in Ukraine each year. The figures from 2009 are markedly higher than those from the previous years. For example, from 1997 to 2009 the number of Pagan congregations in Ukraine grew by 76.⁴ This situation is different from that in the Ukrainian North American diaspora, where Ukrainian Paganism is in decline.

In addition to organized communities, Ukrainian Paganism is also represented by solitary or “independent” Pagans who do not officially belong to any particular organizations, but are attracted by Pagan ideas. Some Ukrainian Pagans rely on the teachings of either Volodymyr Shaian or Lev Sylenko. Others incorporate the ideas of both these leaders while building their own doctrines and spiritualities. In addition, the Ukrainian Pagan discourse is enriched by many influential ideologists who have come after Shaian and Sylenko.

I have chosen to focus primarily on three groups – the Native Ukrainian National Faith RUNVira (hereafter referred to as **RUNVira**); the Native Faith Association of Ukraine (further addressed as **Native Faith**); and the Ancestral Fire of Native Orthodox Faith (hereafter referred to as **Ancestral Fire**) - for the following reasons. Firstly, in terms of numbers of members, these are the largest branches of Ukrainian Paganism. Consequently, while conducting research, I predominantly encountered representatives of these groups. Secondly, these three groups each hold a unique place in the general Pagan discourse. RUNvira and Native Faith are closely tied to the origins of Ukrainian Paganism while Ancestral Fire represents a more recently created movement that is growing rapidly, not

only in present-day Ukraine but also beyond its borders. Thirdly, although overlapping in many ways, the three groups differ markedly from each other, demonstrating the great diversity within Ukrainian Paganism.

RUNVIRA

Organizational History

a) *RUNVira in Ukraine*

As previously mentioned, RUNvira was founded by Lev Sylenko and initially developed in the Ukrainian North American diaspora. The first community was officially registered in Chicago, Illinois on December 3, 1966, and consisted of 53 families (Kolodnyi, Ch 1.). Subsequent congregations appeared in Allentown, Pennsylvania (March 4, 1970); Atlantic City, New Jersey (October 15, 1971); New York, New York (May 29, 1973); Montreal, Quebec (September 4, 1973); Hamilton, Ontario (February 10, 1975); and Toronto, Ontario (April 24, 1979) (Sylenko 1996a: 6). By the mid-1990s, RUNVira communities had been established in the following countries and cities: Canada (Winnipeg, Ottawa, Niagara, Edmonton, Calgary, Regina, Vancouver); USA (Spring Glen, Rochester, Syracuse, Buffalo, Detroit, Chicago, Denver, Bridgeport, Hartford, Trenton, San-Francisco, Hot Spring, Minneapolis, Cleveland, Philadelphia, San Diego, La Vegas, Phoenix); Australia (Canberra, Sidney, Brisbane, Carrington); England (London, Bolton, Rochdell); Germany (Essen, Stuttgart); and New Zealand (Masterton) (Sylenko 1996a: 6).

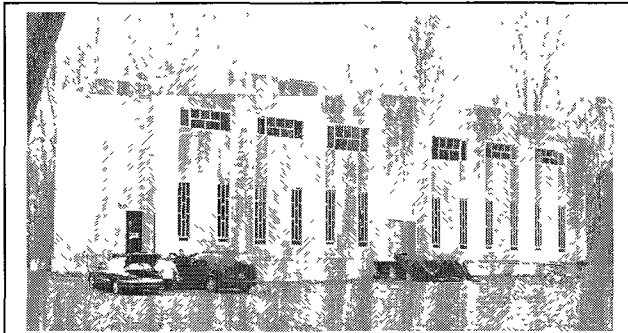


Figure 3 - 1. Oriiana Holy Temple in Spring Glen, NY, USA.

The main spiritual centre of RUNVira in the diaspora is at the Oriiana Holy Temple of Mother Ukraine [*Святиня Матері України “Оріяна”*] in Spring Glen, New York (Fig.

3-1). Sylenko resided there in the 1980s and early 1990s.

In the 1980s, RUNVira in the diaspora split into two major branches, with only a minor difference in their names: The Association of Sons and Daughters of Ukraine RUNVira [*Об’єднання Синів і Дочок України РУНВіра*] (aka OSIDU) and The Association of Sons and Daughters RUNVira [*Об’єднання Синів і Дочок РУНВіра*] (aka OSID). The OSIDU community consists of those individuals who remained unquestionably loyal to Lev Sylenko. The OSID group represents former followers of Sylenko who, although still recognizing Sylenko as the founder of this religion, reject his ultimate political power. The representatives of OSID RUNVira took over the temple in Spring Glen through legal means, accusing Sylenko of misusing community funds.

According to current information, the Spring Glen community is the only remaining active RUNVira group in North America. However, its membership is gradually declining. This community now consists of only a handful of families, where in the 1970s and 1980s it numbered around one hundred people. Many



Figure 3 - 2. RUNVira followers meet Lev Sylenko (in wheelchair) at Boryspil' airport port in Kyiv. Spring, 2008. Photo courtesy of the RUNVira community at the RUNVira Council in Bohoiavlens'ke, Ukraine, spring 2008.

resources from Spring Glen are now being redirected to Ukraine. Lev Sylenko died in Canada on November 25, 2008, at the age of 87, shortly after his first and only post-WWII visit to Ukraine.

b) *RUNVira in Ukraine*

In Ukraine, the first RUNVira community was officially established in Kyiv on September 17, 1991, less than a month after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Sylenko 1996a: 6). It was headed by Bohdan Ostrovs'kyi, a professional bard [kobzar]. By the end of the 1990s, there were approximately fifty RUNVira communities registered across Ukraine as well as over ten unregistered congregations. Some communities consist of only a couple of families, while others boast over one hundred members (Ivakhiv 2005a: 17).

Because of close contacts maintained between its followers throughout the world, the split of RUNVira in the diaspora reflected clearly on its organizational situation in Ukraine (Ivakhiv 2005a: 17). By the mid-2000s, OSIDU RUNVira claimed approximately twenty-six congregations within Ukraine, while OSID

RUNVira represented the largest RUNVira branch, consisting of about 38 registered communities (Ivakhiv 2005a: 17-18). OSID is closely connected with the Spring Glen RUNVira community. Its administrative body is called the Holy Council [*Священна Рада*], which is headed by Bohdan Ostrov'skyi.

Ideology and Publications

RUNVira ideology is most fully presented in its main sacred text *Maha Vira* [Maha Bipa] written by Lev Sylenko. Its title combines the Sanskrit term *Maha* which means “great” and the Ukrainian word *vira* which means “faith.” *Maha Vira* has appeared in print in several editions. Its first edition, published in the USA in 1980, numbered 1427 pages. RUNVira followers view *Maha Vira* as the Bible of their faith. This book offers Sylenko’s interpretations of a perceived 11,000-year history of Ukraine, his philosophy regarding life, religion and the cosmos, as well as his didactic directions for the “Ukrainians of a new age.” Each theme in *Maha Vira* forms a separate chapter. In total, there are 52 chapters identified as 52 days of thinking [*52 дні мислення*].

Sylenko’s ideology is based on the idea of ethnic primordialism, which implies that humans were naturally divided into ethno-cultural groups in the process of their evolution and in the context of their interactions with particular natural environments. Varying geographic locations and experiences within particular environments have resulted in a diversity of religious views, languages and other cultural specificities of ethnic groups (Ivakhiv 2005a: 17). Sylenko argues that such diversity enriches the spiritual life of humanity (Sylenko 2005:

6). He strongly resists any foreign political and religious oppression. Sylenko perceives Ukrainians as superior Europeans, descendants of the ancient Oriians (Aryans), and considers Kyiv the most ancient city of the “White race.”

Maha Vira also provides descriptions of particular Ukrainian rituals and holiday celebrations. Many are based on Ukrainian village folklore, interpreted and/or modified by Sylenko, while others are newly created.

Chronology

The RUNvira calendar represents Sylenko’s own chronology. It begins 11,000 years ago, when the Mezyn culture reached the apogee of its development. In RUNVira, the year 2010 according to the Gregorian calendar is the Dazhboh year 11117.

Organizational Structure/Hierarchy

In order to have the right to conduct RUNVira rituals and lead a community, a person must have obtained the status of *RUNtato* [RUNfather] or *RUNmama* [RUNmother]. While Lev Sylenko was alive, this status could be obtained by making an application directly to him, accompanied by letters of recommendation from fellow RUNVira followers. In RUNVira communities, RUNmamas are markedly outnumbered by their male counterparts.

The RUNtato is a spiritual leader who is expected to teach his congregation how to apply RUNVira in real life. He is to give advice to his community members on various matters regarding their personal and social lives.

He is also expected to possess specific personality traits. The RUNtato is self-controlled, speaks softly and behaves in a noble way, never judges, accuses, or intimidates anybody, and never shows his anger. In general, he is the one who is completely trusted in his community (Sylenko 1991:22). Sylenko also insists that the RUNtato should display his loyalty and respect to the teachings of his Prophet, who happens to be Lev Sylenko (Sylenko 1991: 69).

Spirituality

a) Beliefs and Rituals

RUNVira followers view their religion as a perfection of the original old Slavic polytheism “in favor of a scientifically grounded monotheism centered around Dazhboh, an impersonal representation of the life-giving energy of the cosmos” (Ivakhiv 2005a: 18).

Sylenko provides a detailed description of RUNVira practices in his *Sacred Book of Rituals: Service Book* [Священна Книга Обрядів: Требник], published in 1991 in the USA. RUNVira rites can be divided into two major parts: life cycle and calendar cycle.⁵ The life cycle rituals include the blessing of a newborn child, marriage, funeral and the commemoration of the deceased 40 days after his or her death. RUNVira calendar holidays are associated with folk beliefs (re)created by Sylenko. These include Lark Sunday [Жайворонкова Неділя] (March 24), Willow Sunday [Вербна Неділя] (April 7), Great Day of Dazhboh Light [Великдень Світла Дажбожого] (April 14) and others.

Some other holidays are devoted to famous historical figures that Sylenko calls the Spiritual Giants [*Духовні Богатирі*] of the Ukrainian nation. Among these is the Kyivan Rus' Prince Sviatoslav (approx. 935-972) who is known for his victorious military campaigns that helped him to expand the borders of Kyivan Rus'. Sviatoslav is glorified for both his achievements as a warrior and as the last pagan leader of Kyivan Rus' who did not betray the faith of his forefathers. Other figures include poet Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861), and writers, poets and politico-cultural activists Ivan Franko (1856-1916) and Lesia Ukrainka (1871-1913) who are consecrated by RUNVira on the basis of Sylenko's interpretations of their works and activities. Sylenko views them as sharp critics of Christianity and active promoters of ancestral faith.

The third set of important days is devoted to contemporary social and environmental issues: Animal Protection Day [*День Охорони Животини*] (April 28); Day of the Floral World [*День Рослинного Світу*] (May 21); Day of People's Anger [*День Народного Гніву*] meant to recognize the foreign intruders and oppressors of the Ukrainian nation (November 5); and Donor Day [*День Жертводавця*] (July 12). RUNVira followers also celebrate Holy *Maha Vira* Day and the Birthday of the Native Prophet on September 27.

The Holy Hour of Self-Reflection [*Священна Година Самопізнання*], a basic weekly (Sunday) ritual, constitutes the core part of most thematic rites. Although Sylenko allows some flexibility in preparing rituals, he insists that *Maha Vira* remains the main source in this process. The RUNtato is supposed to choose those parts of *Maha Vira* that correspond to a particular theme of the Holy

Hour (Sylenko 1991: 69). For example, on Taras Shevchenko's Day, he reads excerpts from *Maha Vira* devoted to Shevchenko's life and his creative legacy. On "folk" holidays, the RUNtato reads those passages from *Maha Vira* that describe how a particular holiday was celebrated in the past and how it should be observed by the "Ukrainians of a new age."

c) Symbols and Ritual Objects

The majority of RUNVira's standardized ritual objects feature political symbols, both historical and contemporary. The most prominent of these are the present-day Ukrainian state flag, blue and yellow in colour, and the trident, the state emblem of Ukraine. A widely used historical element is the flag of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army UPA, black and red in colour (Fig. 3-5).

The RUNVira trident is called *Trysuttia* [Трисуття], and is usually encircled by a stylized sun, a symbol of Dazhboh. The Trysuttia symbolizes the worlds of *Iav*, *Nav*, and *Prav*, originally mentioned in *The Book of Veles*. The world of *Iav* is the visible world, the world of *Nav* – the spiritual world, and that of *Prav* is the world of customs and laws of nature. The Trysuttia is incorporated in the blue and yellow RUNVira flag and forms the main part of the Dazhboh Sign [Знамення Дажбоже], a transportable ritual object (Figs. 3-4, 3-5).

Another widely used RUNVira symbol is the meander. It is associated with the Mezyn culture and is perceived as the most archaic form of artistic and ancestral spiritual expression.

The images of Mother Lel' and Father Or, viewed as the foreparents of present-day Ukrainians (Fig. 3-3), along with the portraits of Sylenko and those of the Spiritual Giants can often be found in RUNVira interiors (Fig. 3-4).

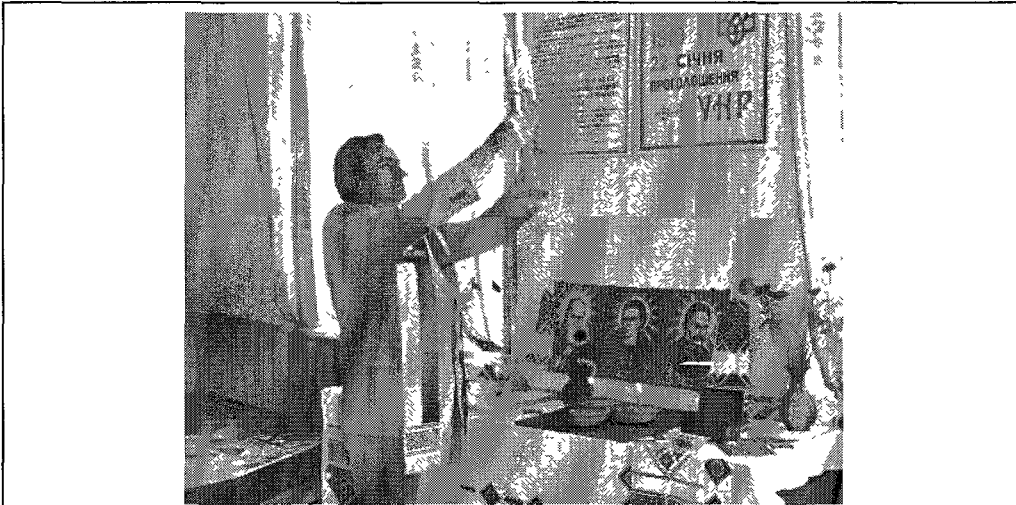


Figure 3 - 3. The *Skytita* [Scythia] RUNVira community in L'viv, western Ukraine. RUNtato Liubomyr conducts the Holy Hour in a rented room. Among other objects, the portraits of Shevchenko, Franko and Ukrainka are displayed on a ritual table. June, 2008.



Figure 3 - 4. Sanctuary wall of the Holy Temple *Oriiana* in Spring Glen, NY, USA. The images of Mother Lel' (right) and Father Or (left) are incorporated into the sanctuary. Please note the *Trysutia* encircled by a stylized sun in the centre of the wall above the altar table. April, 2008.

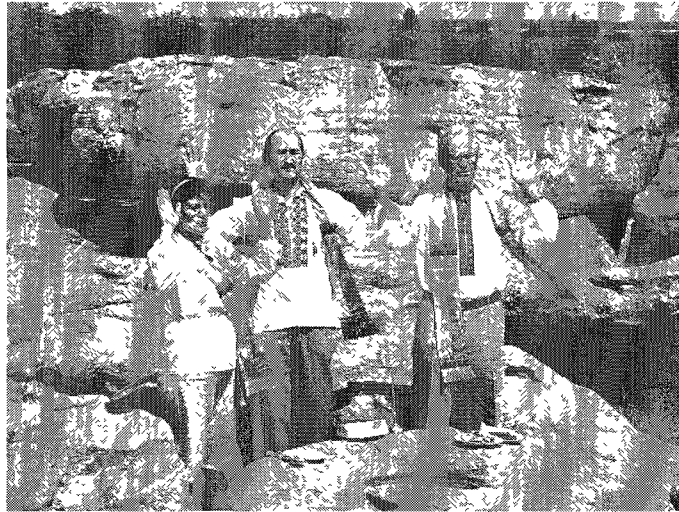


Figure 3 - 5. Although RUNVira adherents conduct their services predominantly indoors, they often visit what they perceive as the sacred places of their ancestors. This photo was taken during one such occasion. The L'viv-based *Rat' Sviatoslava* community visiting the Kamiana Mohyla [Rock Mound] near Zaporizhzhia. The RUNmama and two RUNtatos wear *sviadany* (long, narrow, blue and yellow ribbons with red and black pieces of cloth, the symbolic colours of the UPA, attached to them) while conducting the Holy Hour of Self-Reflection. A Dazhboh Sign and a copy of *Maha Vira* form part of their altar. July 6, 2008.

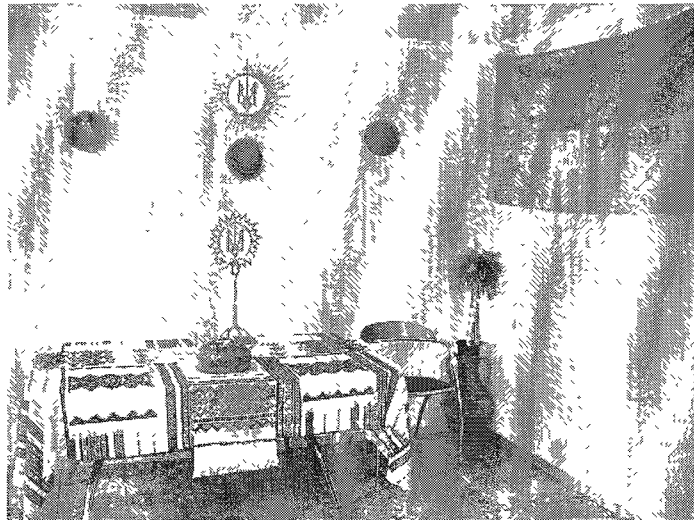


Figure 3 - 6. The Kyiv Residence of Lev Sylenko where he spent the last several months of his life before he returned to North America. Please note the RUNVira symbols displayed in this room: an OSIDU RUNVira flag and a *Trysutia* on the walls and a portable *Dazhboh Sign* on the table. The table is covered with embroidered cloths *rushnyky*. August, 2008.

d) Name-giving: Initiation into RUNVira

A person who decides to join RUNVira has to choose a native name [pidne im'ya]. RUNVira adherents view the majority of contemporary Ukrainian names as “foreign.” To them, what makes this situation even worse is that many names such as Maria, Petro [Peter], Pavlo [Paul] and others are closely associated with Christianity. While talking about their names, RUNvira followers (as well as other Pagans) often explain that native Ukrainian names have to be “transparent” and “easily readable” as were the names of their ancestors. Some of these old names such as Bohdan [given by God], Sviatoslav [glorifying the sacred], Liubomyr [loving peace] are still widely used by Ukrainians today. If a person who wishes to officially join RUNVira has a “truly Ukrainian” name already, this person need not be renamed.

In addition to old names that can be encountered in primary chronicles, new names are created on the basis of the model described above: Boholiub [the



Figure 3 - 7. A RUNVira ritual of Name-giving. RUNtato Myroslav (on the right) blesses a new RUNVira adherent with a Dazhboh Sign.

one who loves God], Svitoslava [glorifying the world], Zoreslava [glorifying the stars], and others. When a name is chosen, a potential RUNVira follower is supposed to go through the ritual of name-giving [im'yannarechennya].

e) *Advancing Sylenko's Teachings*

The majority of RUNVira communities, including those that separated from

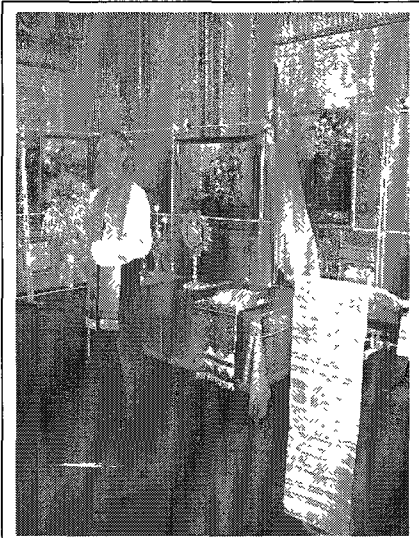


Figure 3 - 8. B. Ostrovs'kyi conducting the *Nabozhenstvo*. He holds a *didukh* (a symbol of the spirit of ancestors made of a sheaf of wheat), a popular Christmas attribute in village folklore. In Ostrovs'kyi's services, the *Didukh* replaces ears of wheat, a symbol of the ancestral agricultural life style, as used in Sylenko's Holy Hours. June 29, 2008.

Sylenko (OSID), usually follow Sylenko's instructions regarding the RUNVira rituals.

However, sometimes community leaders approach Sylenko's teachings selectively.

Perhaps the most radical example of an attempt to "advance" Sylenko's ideas is represented by the activities of the Ukraine-

based head of OSID RUNVira Bohdan

Ostrovs'kyi.⁶ Ostrovs'kyi's weekly service

called *Nabozhenstvo* [the service of honouring

God] only vaguely resembles Sylenko's Holy

Hour of Self-Reflection. Moreover,

Ostvosv'kyi refers to himself as priest

[*священник*], not RUNtato. In his opinion, the Ukrainian people have historically

been hostile to innovations and foreign influences on their traditions. This leader

is convinced that people always prefer familiar things. Sylenko's terms *RUNtato*

and *RUNmama* sound "somewhat funny" to him because they are new and foreign

[*чужі*] to Ukrainians.

Although Ostrovs'kyi consults Sylenko's *Sacred Book of Rituals* while preparing his sacred services, he does not read much from *Maha Vira*. To

Ostrovs'kyi, what makes rites especially engaging and meaningful is colourful ritualistic actions and singing.

RUNVira: Politics as the Dominating Feature

Although RUNVira adapts many folkloric elements, this religion is heavily charged with nationalist politics. To RUNVira followers, references to the idealized glorious past as well as their present-day alternative spirituality represent a mode of resistance to the political oppression of Ukraine throughout its history and a way of liberation from “political slavery.” RUNVira’s political orientation can be seen in its rituals based on the reading of heavily nationalist *Maha Vira*. This ideology is also reflected in RUNVira’s calendar that is largely devoted to those figures that, for their perceived contributions to the development of the Ukrainian nation, occupy prominent positions in the overall nationalist discourse. RUNVira’s emphasis on politics is also represented in its major symbols and ritual objects that feature political elements.

NATIVE FAITH

Organizational History

a) Origins of Native Faith in Ukraine (mid 1930s-early 1940s)

The origins of Native Faith are associated with the year 1934. This was the year when the idea of the revival of pre-Christian religion first occurred to Volodymyr Shaian on the Carpathian Mount Grekhit, where Shaian participated in Hutsul folk traditions and felt a connection with the ancient past and the

wisdom of his ancestors (Murovych 1987: 7). Nine years later, in 1943, in L'viv, Shaian established his first Order of the Knights of the Solar God. Its members made “knightly oaths of allegiance,” acknowledging their belief in ancestral Gods and Goddesses and promising to maintain life-long faith, integrity, love and devotion to Shaian as the reviver of the ancestral faith (Murovych 1987: 7; Zoreslava 2003: 27).

Before fleeing to Western Europe during WWII, Shaian insisted that those Knights who did not plan to leave Ukraine should join the Ukrainian Insurgent Army UPA. Laryssa Murovych, while studying the chronicles of the UPA, found a record regarding an insurgent group by the name of Perun (God of thunder) that rescued seven prisoners from the village of Poverhiv in the Komarnians'ky region in September of 1944 (Murovych 1987: 8). Considering the name of the group, Murovych hypothesizes that this organization consisted of Shaian's followers.

b) Native Faith in the Diaspora

In 1944, in Augsburg, Germany, Shaian established a periodical called *Svitannia*, and began to organize the Ukrainian Free University [*Український Вільний Університет*] (Zoreslava 2003: 26). This is also when he created the second group of the Order of the Knights of the Solar God (Zoreslava 2003: 26). After the liquidation of the Displaced Person's camps, the Knights began to leave Western Europe for different parts of the world, especially Canada and the USA (Lozko 2004:15). In 1948, Volodymyr Shaian moved to London, England, where he continued to work actively as a scholar and cultural activist (Murovych 1987:

7-8). He developed a strategic plan for his Knights, requiring, in particular, that they should go to North America and establish a financial basis for the Order. The Knights were expected to donate one tenth of their incomes to the Central office of the Order. These finances were to become the common property of the Knights.

In 1972, due to the efforts of Shaian's followers in Ontario (poet Levko Romen, engineer Nestor Rohowsky and Laryssa Murovych), the quarterly *Svitannia* evolved into the Institute of Volodymyr Shaian, which was incorporated in Canada (Murovych 1987: 9). Volodymyr Shaian died in 1974 in London, England. His funeral, in the style of Native Faith customs, was conducted by the candidate for the status of *Volkhv*, Winnipeg-based Myroslav Shkavrytko, who originally was a follower of RUNVira (Zoreslava 2003: 26).

In 1981, the group of Pagans in Hamilton was reregistered as the Ukrainian Native Faith Church [Об'єднання Українців Рідної Віри] by Myroslav Sytnyk, the Honourable Elder [Достойний Старший Провідник] of Native Faith, who was also initially connected with RUNVira (Svaroh 2005: 46; Ivakhiv 2005a: 22). Thanks to Sytnyk's efforts, many of Shaian's works have appeared in print. The Hamilton community donated Shaian's library to the Research Institute "Ukrainica" at the Ukrainian Cultural Centre in Toronto. Shaian's correspondence and original manuscripts as well as the translations of the Order's publications are now preserved at the National Archives of Canada in Ottawa (Murovych 1987: 11).

c) *Revived Native Faith in Ukraine*

Considering that the few remaining followers of Shaian in Canada are elderly people, they granted authority of leadership to Ukraine-based Halyna Lozko. She was officially initiated by Hamilton-based Myroslav Sytnyk in Kyiv in 1994 (Anonymous 2004: 18-19).

Since the time of her initiation, Lozko has been a very enthusiastic Native Faith leader and promoter of her teacher's ideas in Ukraine. Her Pagan name is Zoreslava and she is addressed as the Supreme Pagan Priestess of Ukraine-Rus' [*Верховна Волхвиня України-Руси*]. Lozko is a philologist, folklorist, ethnologist, and philosopher. She has defended two dissertations having received the Candidate of Sciences (vaguely comparable to a Western PhD) and the Doctor of Sciences (roughly resembles Habilitation in some European and Asian countries) degrees in the field of philosophy. Lozko is currently employed as a university professor.

Lozko's Pagan activities began with the creation of the first Native Faith community called Pravoslavia [*Православія*] in 1993. Later, in addition to the establishment of the periodical *Svaroh* (in 1995), which has grown into a publishing and information centre, she founded the Svitovyd Center for the Revival of Ukrainian Culture [*Центр відродження української культури "Світовид"*], the School of the Native Faith [*Школа Рідної Віри*] (in 1995), and the Museum of the Book of Veles in Kyiv (in 1996). The museum was closed by the local government in 1996 (Ivakhiv 2005a: 22). The School of the Native Faith eventually evolved into the Ukrainian Spiritual Academy of Native Faith

[Українська Духовна Академія Рідновірів]. Recently, due to Lozko's initiative, the first Ukrainian Pagan Bookstore [Українська язичницька книгарня] was opened in Kyiv on Svoboda Square.⁷

By the mid-2000s, under Lozko's leadership, Native Faith grew to include five registered communities and over ten unregistered congregations across Ukraine (Ivakhiv 2005a: 22). Today, the "Contacts" page of the Native Faith website demonstrates how this stream of Ukrainian Paganism has expanded over the last few years. It now embraces 29 communities across Ukraine.⁸

Ideology and Publications

Faith of Our Ancestors [Віра Предків Наших], a compilation of Volodymyr Shaian's works, is the first and one of the most influential Native Faith publications. It was first published in 1987 by Shaian's followers in Canada. This source includes Shaian's interpretations of old Slavic mythology and Vedic worldview, as well as his patriotic readings of prominent Ukrainian writers and cultural figures such as Hryhorii Skovoroda, Taras Shevchenko, Ivan Franko, Lesia Ukrainka and Oleh Ol'zhych. In addition, it provides Shaian's analysis of *The Book of Veles* and his translation of *The Lay of Igor's Campaign*.

Halyna Lozko's numerous publications also play a significant role in the development of Native Faith. Her approaches towards the interpretation of Ukrainian culture and ethnicity resonate with those of Lev Sylenko and her own predecessor, Volodymyr Shaian. Lozko writes through the prism of ethno-nationalist and racist ideologies. She is actively engaged in the promotion of the

“White race” with the help of ethnicity-oriented religions. For example, in her *Awakened Eneia* [*Пробуджена Енея*] (2006), produced on the basis of her doctoral dissertation, the authour strives to justify the revival of native religions across Europe as the only alternative for the self-preservation of nations. She views Christianity and other major monotheistic religions as totalitarian forces and a means of globalization that she finds dangerous for indigenous cultures.

Chronology

Like RUNVira, Native Faith has its own chronology. However, it begins not from the time of the Mezyn culture but from that of the Trypillian civilization. Thus, the year 2010 is recognized as the year 7518 according to this system.

Organizational Structure/Hierarchy

Volkhvynia Zoreslava (Halyna Lozko) is the ultimate authourity of Native Faith. She is the only person who bears the title *Volkhvynia* and who can conduct all the Native Faith rituals. *Zhrets’/Zhrytsia*, a lower rank of Pagan Priest/Priestess, is the spiritual order that can be granted by the Volkhvynia. A bearer of this title is usually the leader of a particular regional community who can conduct the majority of rituals. This person is also expected to complete studies in Native Faith and write a research paper. The third title is *Obriadodii*, meaning the person who conducts rituals. This individual can be initiated either by the Volkhvynia or a *Zhrets’/Zhrytsia* and is authourized to conduct a limited number of rites.

Spirituality

a) Beliefs and Rituals

The followers of Native Faith strive to reconstruct the old Slavic pantheon as accurately as possible, drawing heavily on *The Book of Veles*. They believe in a great variety of Gods and Goddesses who are in charge of various spheres of life and nature, and who manifest themselves in multiple ways: Dazhboh, the Sun-god; Stryboh, the God of winds; Perun, the God of thunder and lightning; Mokosha, the Goddess of female crafts; and many others. The main deity of Native Faith addressed as “the father of the Ukrainian pantheon” is Svaroh, the God of light and heavenly fire.⁹

Although, like their RUNVira counterparts, the adherents of Native Faith honour some historical figures, especially Taras Shevchenko, their calendar *Svaroh's Cycle* [Коло Свароже] embraces exclusively the holidays based on pre-Christian agricultural/magical beliefs and mythology (re)constructed by Shaian and Lozko.

Like Sylenko, Lozko provides instructions on how to celebrate these holidays. Many of her rituals closely resemble folkloric rites, either contemporary or those documented in the past. Still many are less familiar to general insiders of Ukrainian culture as they are (re)constructed by Lozko on the basis of her own interpretations of scarce bits of information from primary historical and folkloric sources.

Svaroh's Cycle honours particular Gods and Goddesses. For example, the holiday of Stryboh, the God of the winds, air, space and weather, is celebrated on

July 14. Lozko suggests that this God has to be honoured with bread and *varenyky* [Ukrainian dumplings] that should to be given to the four winds near a body of water (Lozko 2005b: 447). Another major part of *Svaroh's Cycle* is devoted to various agrarian and nature-related themes. For instance, on March 9, the adherents of Native Faith celebrate the Awakening of the Mother-Earth (Lozko 2005b: 444).



Figure 3 - 9. A Native Faith adherent wearing a paper headgear: the trident encircled by the stylized image of the sun (similar to RUNVira's *Trysutia*). The inscription says "For Native Veda-Faith" [За Рідну Віру-Віду]. August 24, 2006, during the annual Pagan procession *khoda* in Kyiv.



Figure 3 - 10. Native Faith banner with the inscription "Ukrainian Pagans." Please note a trident beneath the inscription on left side. The sign on the right side is a variant of Svarha.

b) Symbols and Ritual Objects

Like those of RUNVira, many ritual objects of Native Faith feature political elements such as the Ukrainian state flag and the trident (Figs. 3-11, 3-12.) One of the main symbols of this Ukrainian Pagan group is the swastika

called *Svarha*, an element that can be found in traditional Ukrainian embroidery, ceramics and *pysanky*. Native Faith followers interpret the swastika as a solar sign signifying eternal movement and as a sign of their main god Svaroh.

c) Name-Giving: Initiation into Native Faith

As in the case of RUNVira, a person seeking to join Native Faith must choose a native name. However, the Native Faith ritual of name-giving is different from that of RUNVira. A potential new adherent is supposed to bring a new (unworn) embroidered shirt for this occasion. During the ritual, this person removes one item of his or her old clothes and puts on the new shirt. In this way, one symbolically parts with one's old self and acquires a new spiritual identity. Often, the Volkvynia blesses a necklace with a Svarha-shaped pendant over a bonfire for the new Pagan to wear as a talisman.

Native Faith: Folklore as the Dominating Feature

Like their RUNVira counterparts, many adherents of Native Faith are oriented towards politics. Nationalist and racist ideas related to the concept of ethnic blood purity are not uncommon themes of their activities. Since most of these Pagans live in Ukraine, they are often politically active and immediately respond to present-day socio-political issues in their country, rather than focusing predominantly on Ukraine's past, as is more common for RUNVira followers in the diaspora.

However, political themes are much weaker, if present at all, in Native Faith's spiritual beliefs and rituals. Instead, folklore represents the most important component of their sacred practices. Collecting and studying folklore is one of the major tasks of Native Faith leaders and activists. Representatives of this stream often enthusiastically share research findings such as songs, beliefs or rituals that they record from village elders or find in ethnographic literature, and further incorporate these into Pagan activities.

ANCESTRAL FIRE

Organizational History

Ancestral Fire was formed in June 2003 by *Volkhvy* (Pagan Priests, pl.) and *Viduny* (Knowing individuals; one rank lower than *Volkhvy*) of Podillia, Transcarpathia and Zaporizhzhia who gathered atop Mount Bohyt. (Many Ukrainian Pagans consider this mount sacred because of academic hypotheses that there had been religious sites in this area in the pre-Christian past). On May 22, 2004, the first Council of Ancestral Fire followers took place in Kyiv, where it was announced that at that point Ancestral Fire included approximately twenty communities. Administratively, Ancestral Fire was comprised of three Regional Fires [*Крайові Вогнища*]: Kyiv Regional Fire – headed by Voleliub Dobzhans'kyi; Podillia Regional Fire – led by Bohovyda Khmel'nyts'ka; and Zaporizhzhia Regional Fire – headed by Svitovyt Pashnyk. Volodymyr Kurov'skyi was announced as the Supreme *Volkhv* [Pagan Priest, sing.] of Ancestral Fire of the Native Orthodox Faith [*Верховний Волхв Родового*

Вогнища Рідної Православної Віри] and elected to serve as the head of this religious organization for the subsequent five years (*Rodove Vohnyshche* 2005 (7513): 3).

Kurovs'kyi still heads Ancestral Fire today. Under his leadership, this stream of Ukrainian Paganism has actively expanded. According to the “Contacts” page on its official website, Ancestral Fire’s present-day organizational structure is quite impressive. In Ukraine, it now consists of four Regional Fires, which together embrace 20 established communities and 6 initiative groups (communities in the process of formation).¹⁰

Moreover, since its formation, Ancestral Fire has been actively developing external relationships with other East European Pagan communities and individual Pagans in Russia, Slovakia, Serbia, Belarus, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria and Poland (*Rodove Vohnyshche* 2005 (7513):3). Over the last few years, Ancestral Fire has become more pan-Slavic, rather than exclusively pro-Ukrainian, in its orientation. Pan-Slavic ideology helps Ancestral Fire to spread its influence all across Russia. As of today, it has under its umbrella the *Slaviia* community in Moscow and two Regional Fires in Russia: the North Caucasian Scythian Regional Fire [*Північно-Кавказьке Скіфське крайове вогнище*] embraces six communities and initiative groups in the Stavropol’ region, seven in the Krasnodar region, and one initiative group in the Astrakhan’ area, while the Volga - Don Regional Fire [*Волго-Донське крайове вогнище*] includes three communities.¹¹

Ancestral Fire has also expanded beyond the Slavic world. This group now has followers in Munich, Germany, frequently visited by Volodymyr Kurovs'kyi ("Litopys," Ancestral Fire website). Furthermore, Ancestral Fire's website announced a large festival "Native Faith – Source of Happiness" [*Родная Вера – Источник Счастья*] that was to be held in Toronto, Canada from April 20 to May 10, 2010, with the participation of several leaders of Ancestral Fire. The festival aimed to organize (Slavic) Pagans of the North American continent and to discuss the future of their native spirituality.¹²

Many representatives of Ancestral Fire, predominantly its male adherents, belong to an association of Cossack-sorcerers [*Характерне*

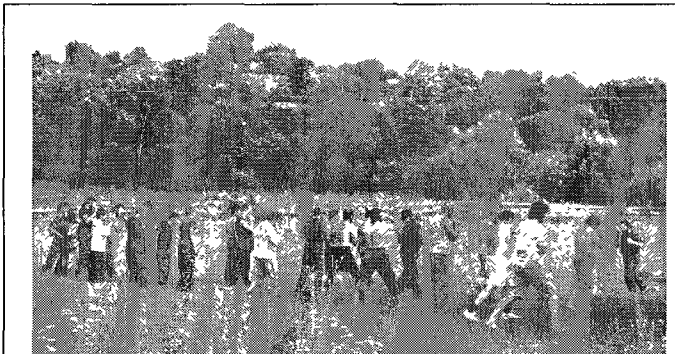


Figure 3 - 11. Cossacks-sorcerers' camp in the village of Rashtivtsi, Ukraine. Volodymyr Kurovs'kyi (farthest on the right side) conducts a martial arts workshop. July, 2008.

Козацтво] created by

Kurovs'kyi in the fall of 1999 (Fig. 3-12).

Cossack-sorcerers, in addition to their physical strength, are

believed to have had

supernatural/magical

powers that made them

glorious warriors. Scholars view Cossack-sorcerers as legendary figures who appear in folkloric texts, with no evidence of real life existence (Shiyan 2006: 109-124). However, present-day Cossacks belonging to Ancestral Fire perceive them as actual heroes and strive for a return to the glorious practices and strength

of these legendary figures. Contemporary Cossack-sorcerers study both martial arts and magic.

Ancestral Fire conducts many educational activities. In addition to numerous lectures, seminars and workshops held by its leaders, this stream has formed the spiritual educational establishment known as *PRAV*, the abbreviated name for the Orthodox Native Academy of Faith [*Православна Рідновірська Академія Віровідання*]. The Academy offers courses on various aspects of ancestral Slavic spirituality. The winter session that took place from January 3 to January 13, 2010, reportedly had 48 full-time students. Another 72 individuals took distance-learning courses.¹³

Volodymyr Kurov'skyi and his wife, All-knowing Mother [*Відаюча Матінка*] Lada have also founded the *Rodosvit* Academy of Human Development [*Академія Розвитку Людини "Родосвіт"*] that teaches "Vedic spiritual practices of self-perfection and healing."¹⁴ As a part of the activity of this Academy, Volodymyr and Lada have produced a great number of books and audio-visual materials. Since a large percentage of their students and customers are from Russia, the majority of *Rodosvit* publications are in Russian. I will focus on these materials after addressing some recent organizational dynamics.

Despite its otherwise successful development, Ancestral Fire has experienced some structural changes and losses due to internal conflicts between its leaders. A major split took place in the fall of 2007. This split was brought about by Kurov'skyi's conflict with *Volkhv* Svitovyt Pashnyk, who was the head of the Zaporizhzhia Regional Fire at the time.¹⁵ Kurov'skyi stripped Pashnyk and

two other leaders of their spiritual orders [духовні сани] because, according to Kurovs'kyi, they had not observed the main principles of their faith, had rudely ignored the Ancestral Fire hierarchy, and had not completed their studies at the *PRAV* Academy.

Svitovyt Pashnyk, in turn, was concerned that Kurovs'kyi and his followers promoted a type of spirituality that had never been characteristic for the ancestors of contemporary Ukrainians. Pashnyk called Kurovs'kyi's group "religious merchants" [релігійні торгаші], arguing that their main intention was to accumulate funds by selling false ideas and images in the name of ancestral memory. In Pashnyk's opinion, it was the desire to make money that led Kurovs'kyi and his followers to their close cooperation with Russia and, consequently, to their re-orientation towards pan-Slavic, rather than exclusively pro-Ukrainian ideas. Pashnyk strongly criticized the active use of Russian over Ukrainian by Ancestral Fire leaders. In addition, he viewed ecumenical endeavours of Ancestral Fire, such as inviting the followers of the Krishna movement to their festivals, as completely unacceptable.

As a result of this conflict, Pashnyk, several other individuals, and six entire communities separated from Volodymyr Kurovs'kyi. Shortly after, Svitovyt Pashnyk and his followers created a new organization called the Rus' Orthodox Circle [Руське Православне Коло].

Ideology and Publications

Like those produced by RUNVira and Native Faith, Ancestral Fire publications provide many references to the distant past. Like their RUNVira and Native Faith counterparts, Ancestral Fire authors express racist sentiments, arguing against inter-racial marriages. However, in Ancestral Fire, these sentiments are not as radical and bold as they are in the cases of RUNVira and Native Faith. The theme of nationalist politics is also markedly less pronounced in Ancestral Fire's ideology. Ancestral Fire followers, rather, strive to build a pan-Slavic spiritual state.

The publications of this stream of Ukrainian Paganism focus almost exclusively on spirituality and its immediate application in real life. Some present their authors' philosophical interpretations of the concepts of time, eternity, good, evil and holiness. Others resemble popular psychology publications, providing advice on how to behave in difficult life situations or how to gain spiritual and physical strength by drawing upon ancestral knowledge about the Universe. Ancestral Fire publications often deal with mystery and magic (associated predominantly with Eastern spiritual traditions).

For example, in *Diagnosing Fate: Improving Karma* [Диагностика судьбы: Исправляем карму] (Kurovskii 2008), Volodymyr and Lada Kurovs'ki, Ancestral Fire's most active writers, attempt to explain the essence of human spiritual and magical power. They introduce what they consider the ancient methods of karmic healing, which enable a person to enter his or her

previous lives to find the causes of their present-day misfortunes. In the annotation to this publication, Volodymyr and Lada promise to teach their readers how to cure the majority of their illnesses, how to overcome their fears, how to improve their relationships with other people, and in general, how to apply the great knowledge of their ancestors to their own lives.



Figure 3 - 12. Volodymyr and Lada Kurovs'ki. Photo from the home page of the Rodosvit Academy (Rodosvit 2008).

A significant amount of attention is devoted to the concept of the family. (Although both RUNVira and Native Faith address the idea of a healthy family as the basis for a healthy Ukrainian nation, this idea does not occupy as prominent a position in these groups as it does in Ancestral Fire). Volodymyr and Lada Kurovs'ki, who consciously strive to set an example of a very harmonious union, express their major concerns regarding present-day family relationships in their book *How to Teach Your Daughter to Be Happy in Love. Formation of the Goddess* [*Как научить дочь быть счастливой в любви. Становление Богини*] (Kurovskiie 2007). The authours emphasize that, traditionally, a woman fulfils herself through the creation of love in her family and through raising happy and healthy children. For a man, his family is the foundation that helps him climb the social ladder and develop his inner potential. Volodymyr and Lada are disturbed by the present-day situation, where gender roles are mixed. In their opinion, this

leads to unhappy marriages. They published a series of books devoted specifically to raising children in line with traditional family values.

The writing style of Ancestral Fire authours is especially striking. It is worthwhile to contrast it with that of RUNVira and Native Faith leaders. The majority of Halyna Lozko's publications are academic in their format (although, due to the authour's biases, they are criticized by many East European scholars and do not fit Western academic discourse). Lozko strives to place her ideas in the context of the larger (scholarly) discourse, providing proper citations and references. Although his voice is very didactic and authouritative, Lev Sylenko's writings also attempt to follow an academic style.

Such a tendency does not dominate in the works of the Ancestral Fire leaders. Rarely do they provide citations or references. This approach is connected with the Ancestral Fire leaders' conviction that their knowledge is not formally acquired, but has been transmitted from generation to generation by word of mouth. These leaders do not treat their works on Slavic mythology and spirituality as products of research (as do Shaian, Lozko, Sylenko and other Pagan ideologists). They perceive their writing as a modern form of sharing knowledge. In order to add a special "ancient" flavour to this knowledge, the Ancestral Fire authours try to imitate the old (Slavic) language of Kyivan Rus' as it appeared in primary chronicles.

Chronology

Like that of Native Faith, Ancestral Fire's chronology begins at the time of the Trypillian civilization. The year 2010 is considered year 7518 in the Ancestral Fire calendar.

Organizational Structure/Hierarchy

The hierarchy of Ancestral Fire's leadership is represented by three spiritual orders. *Volkhv* [Pagan priest, sing.] is the highest title. The *Volkhv* is a spiritual authority who has completed spiritual studies and a probationary period. This person is allowed to conduct all rituals. A *Volkhv* can only be ordained by the Supreme *Volkhv* Volodymyr Kurovs'kyi. The second spiritual rank is *Vidun* [all-knowing individual]. This person is also supposed to complete spiritual studies and probation. When the *Volkhv* is absent, the *Vidun* can be authorized to conduct rituals. A *Vidun* is also ordained exclusively by the Supreme *Volkhv*. The third, lowest, title is *Zhrets'*, who can conduct a limited number of rituals. The *Zhrets'* is also expected to complete spiritual studies and can be ordained by a *Volkhv*, but must have the permission of the Supreme *Volkhv*. The *Volkhv*, the *Vidun* and the *Zhrets'* may have particular specializations such as healer, bard, etc.

Spirituality

a) Beliefs and Practices

Ancestral Fire adherents view the cosmos in terms of *Trinity of Worlds* [Триглав Світів]: *Prava*, *Iava*, and *Nava*, which they interpret differently from

their RUNVira counterparts. In Ancestral Fire, Prava is the world of Gods, Iava is the world of people, and Nava represents the underworld, the kingdom of dark forces. Nava accommodates the souls of those ancestors who did not live a righteous life.

Ancestral Fire followers are polytheistic but consider Rod to be the main God, the creator of the Universe, eternal, omnipresent, all-knowing, almighty, most-righteous and all-good (Mykolaiv 2008: 222). This view of Rod is apparently influenced by Boris Rybakov's hypothesis about the superiority of Rod in the old Slavic pantheon (see Rybakov 1981: 20-25). In Ukrainian and some other Slavic languages, Rod (Rid) also means "clan" understood both as family and as an ethnic community or nation.

Similar to their RUNvira and Native Faith counterparts, Ancestral Fire leaders produce instructive literature outlining the way to conduct rituals. Their *Small Service Book of the Native Orthodox Faith* [Малий Требник Рідної Православної Віри] presents three major categories of Ancestral Fire rites: life-affirming rituals [Обряди життєстверджуючі], life-giving rituals [Обряди життєдайні], and the rituals of Svaroh's Cycle [Обряди Кола Сварожого].

The rite of *Blahosviata* is an example of the life-affirming rituals. It is conducted in order to cleanse a certain place (a living or a work space, a place of worship, a shrine, etc.) of its old energy and fill it with the power of Native Gods.

The funeral ceremony [обряд поховання] belongs to the life-giving rituals. It is conducted when a person's life in Iava [the world of people] ends. Ancestral Fire followers believe that within this ritual, the soul of the deceased is

transferred into Yrii/Vyrii [*Ирий/Вурий*] (heaven). From there, if the deceased lived according to the laws of his faith, the soul enters the world of Prava. However, if one violated the rules of Prava, one's soul falls into Nava.

Ancestral Fire's *Svaroh's Cycle* embraces four holidays that represent different seasons: the Birth of Bozhych [*Різдо Божича*] (winter); the Great Day of Dazhboh [*Великдень Дажбожий*] (spring); Kupalo (summer); and Great Ovsen' [*Великий Овсень*] (autumn). These are adaptations of major traditional folk holidays, with pronounced agricultural themes. For example, Ancestral Fire's celebration of the Birth of Bozhych closely resembles the traditional Ukrainian Holy Supper on Christmas Eve. The entire family is supposed to share twelve meatless dishes. The most important of them is *kutia*, made of boiled wheat. The *didukh*, made from the last sheaf of wheat collected during the harvest, is an important ritual attribute. It symbolizes the presence of family ancestors.

b) Symbols and Ritual Objects

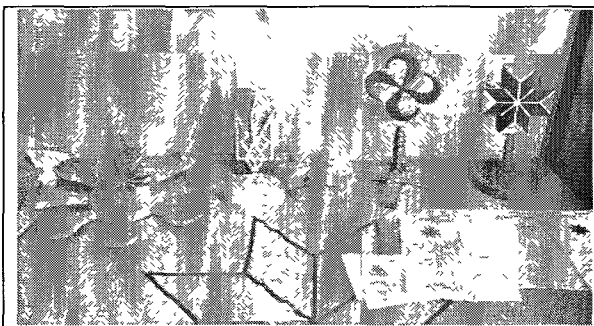
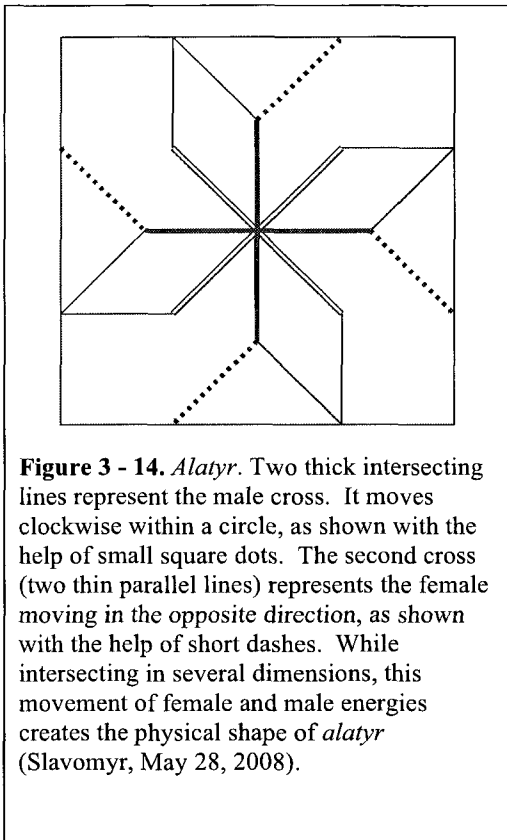


Figure 3 - 13. Ancestral Fire ritual candlesticks displayed in the Ancestral Fire's office in Kyiv. Note the various versions of Alatyr applied to these objects.

In line with their pan-Slavic orientation and relative political indifference, Ancestral Fire communities use Ukrainian state symbols less actively than their RUNVira and Native Faith counterparts. Instead, specifically Pagan

elements dominate in this stream of Ukrainian Paganism. The most important symbol is the *Alatyr* (eight-pointed star) that forms part of all the major ritual objects (Fig. 3-14).

c) Name-giving: Initiation into Ancestral Fire



The purpose of the name-giving ritual in Ancestral Fire is for a potential follower to join the Great Slavic Kin and bring his or her soul and spirit into order. The Volkhv plays an active role in choosing the child's name with the approval of the parents. The Volkhv proposes names based on the time of conception and the child's Heavenly *Svarozhych* [Небесний Сварожич] or constellation/Zodiac sign.

The name-giving ritual includes many attributes. Some of these, such as a sheepskin coat spread inside out, are associated with traditional village folklore. Others, such as the *kryzhma* – a cloth to wrap the baby in, may have pre-Christian origins but are now part of the (Orthodox) Christian baptism ceremony. *Bozhat* (god-father) and *bozhata* (god-

mother) actively participate in this ritual and their roles are similar to those of Christian god-parents.

If one wishes to join Ancestral Fire as an adult (Ancestral Fire's leaders would insist on the term "returning to Ancestral Faith"), they must go through a similar ritual. However, the form of this ritual resembles the name-giving rite in Native Faith. Instead of the attributes described above this person puts on a new embroidered shirt as a symbol of his or her new spiritual identity.

Ancestral Fire: Magic as the Dominant Component

Like Native Faith adherents, Ancestral Fire followers are fascinated with traditional village folklore. However, Ancestral Fire's relative indifference to nationalist politics and its pan-Slavic orientation make it different from both RUNVira and Native Faith. Moreover, unlike RUNVira and Native Faith, Ancestral Fire employs concepts from the field of psychology in its doctrines and practices. Many Ancestral Fire leaders possess esoteric knowledge and can often achieve a desirable effect that cannot be logically, rationally or scientifically explained.¹⁶ This phenomenon is widely understood by folklorists as magic. While politics is important for RUNVira and emphasis on traditional folklore characterizes Native Faith, magic is perhaps the most distinct feature of Ancestral Fire. (See a chart summarizing the organizational history, ideology and spirituality of RUNVira, Native Faith and Ancestral Fire in Appendix 1).

As we can see, Ukrainian Paganism is very dynamic in terms of its organizational history. It is actively developing and constantly changing in terms of its forms, structures and affiliations. There is no common understanding of a Ukrainian/Slavic Pagan spirituality. It is, rather, constantly debated, negotiated and (re)created in given contexts under various influences.

¹ See also Victor Shnirelman, no date.

² For more details on this organization, see Smirnov 2009.

³ RISU 2009.

⁴ RISU 2005.

⁵ Unless otherwise indicated the following summary of RUNVira rituals is based on Sylenko 1991.

⁶ The following description of Ostrovs'kyi's activities is based on my recorded interview with him on June 29, 2008.

⁷ See Svarha Brotherhood's website for details about this bookstore: <http://svarga.kiev.ua/knyga3.htm>, last consulted on April 13, 2011.

⁸ For details, see the "Kontakty (Contacts)" page at Svarha Brotherhood's website: <http://svarga.kiev.ua/kontaktu.shtml>, last consulted on April 13, 2011.

⁹ Please note that different Ukrainian Pagans interpret and appropriate the old Slavic pantheon in different ways. Considering that Halyna Lozko is the successor of Volodymyr Shaian, I provide this list of old spiritual beings as described by her. (See Lozko 2005b: 120-149).

¹⁰ For details, see Kontakty 2003-2008.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² There is no information about whether or not this festival actually took place.

¹³ See Mykolaiv 2009.

¹⁴ For a detailed description of the Academy's activities, see Rodosvit 2008.

¹⁵ The conflict is described as presented in the Internet forum "*Україна – наша Батьківщина* [Ukraine is our fatherland]" (See Anonymous 2007b).

¹⁶ Some activities of Ancestral Fire that involve magic are described in Chapter VI.

CHAPTER IV:

Boundaries and Borders:

Ukrainian Paganism in Its Cultural Context

Ukraine and Christianity

Christianity is considered to have existed in the territory of contemporary Ukraine as an “official” religion since it was established in Kyivan Rus’ by Prince Volodymyr in 988.¹ At the time of Christianization, the state of Kyivan Rus’ was a “federation” of different pagan Slavic tribes. Although they shared a similar polytheistic worldview, beliefs still varied among different groups. For example, while the cult of Perun, god of thunder and lightning, was predominant in some southern tribes, Veles, the cattle god, was the focus of worship in some northern territories (Froianov et al.1992: 4). Volodymyr’s religious reform was connected with his desire to obtain absolute control over the Slavic tribes and to centralize his authority in Kyiv. Volodymyr’s first attempt to use religion to unite the Slavic tribes politically was based on a reform of the pagan pantheon. For the purpose of symbolic unity, Volodymyr placed several wooden idols of gods on the hill outside his palace courtyard. He asserted the superiority of Perun over the other deities by placing him in the centre and “decorating” him with a silver head and golden beard. Some scholars view this as Volodymyr’s fundamental mistake, as tribes who gave differing preferences to various gods, did not appreciate this imposition of hierarchy. (He later viewed paganism as a religion that provoked divisiveness among these social units and made them difficult to consolidate). Volodymyr’s next step was to introduce a new monotheistic religion. The variant

of Christianity practiced in Constantinople was chosen over other branches of Christianity and other religions that Volodymyr was familiar with, since it fit with the Slavic identity as represented both in the people's general worldview and their pagan religious practices. For example, Slavs were drinkers of alcohol and eaters of meat, which made Islam totally unacceptable for them. They preferred colorful ritual celebrations involving visual art, music and rejoicing, and they found these elements in the Christian Church of the Eastern Rite (Froianov et al.1992: 4-5).

Christianity is still the official religion of Ukraine. The dominant position is occupied by the Christian Churches of the Byzantine Rite. The official website of the Religious Information Service of Ukraine (RISU), provides the following statistics of registered churches in Ukraine as of January 1, 2009: Ukrainian Orthodox Church (of the Moscow Patriarchate) – 11444, Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyivan Patriarchate – 4093, Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church – 1183, Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church – 3566.²

Evangelism and other Christian Protestant denominations are rapidly growing in present-day Ukraine as well. In 2009, the RISU recorded 1455 congregations of the All-Ukraine Union of Christians of the Evangelical Faith Pentecostals, 601 Full Gospel Churches, 1005 congregations of the Ukrainian Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Church, and 685 communities of Jehovah's Witnesses.³

The situation is similar in Ukrainian North-American diaspora communities. Traditional Christian churches dominate among religious Ukrainians on this continent. For example, the Ukrainian Catholic Church of

Canada consists of 408 parishes,⁴ while the Ukrainian Catholic Church of the USA includes 218 parishes.⁵ Membership in Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada has historically ranged between 20 and 25 percent of the Ukrainian Canadian population. In 1989, this church consisted of 128,000 members in 290 congregations (UOCC 2006-2010). The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the USA consists of 103 parishes (UOC of the USA, no date).

If we contrast the statistics for Christian churches with those for Pagan communities, we can see that, Ukrainian Paganism occupies the status of a minority religion in the predominantly Christian contexts of both Ukraine and the diaspora.

Ukrainian Paganism: Contexts of Development

Unlike the anti-nationalist ideas often promoted by present-day Western Paganism, Ukrainian Paganism is largely nationalist in character because of the context in which it developed. Although there were some earlier attempts to revive old Slavic beliefs and practices in Ukraine, contemporary Ukrainian Paganism developed most actively in the post WWII Ukrainian diaspora and post Soviet Ukraine.

In these contexts, Paganism represents a mode of resistance to both the political oppression of Ukraine and to the dominant role of Christianity (considered a “foreign force” by Pagans) in that country. These contexts are united by socio-political turmoil, when the need for constructing a distinct national identity was felt most strongly. This idea is inspired by Galina

Lindquist's anthropological research on the active revival and development of magic in urban centers of post-Soviet Russia that had experienced similar turbulence. Lindquist emphasizes that unstable socio-political circumstances influence people to seek what she calls "alternative forms of hope:"

When the societal channels of agency are blocked, people turn to alternative ones...; when societal hope disappears, together with trust in electoral promises and utopian ideological projects, the culture generates alternative ways in which people can maintain their engagement with tomorrow, it offers alternative forms of hope... (Lindquist 2005: 9)

The Pagan myth is an alternative construct that, in the context of socio-political turbulence, provides hope for the future betterment of the nation by emphasizing its great cultural potential rooted in the past. In the diaspora, representatives of the politically conscious Ukrainian intelligentsia felt compelled to construct and emphasize their national identity, considering that Ukraine was occupied by foreign political forces (both Nazi and Soviet) during and following WWII. In Ukraine, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the myth of the "Soviet people" was shattered, thus increasing the need for many individuals to seek out a new sense of self. Ukrainian Pagans explore old Slavic polytheistic beliefs and practices, searching for a "true" and "pure" Ukrainian identity today.

For many people, Christianity played a prominent role in the formation of a national identity in the post-Soviet context. The "spiritual renaissance" of organized Christian churches was a response to the Soviet era when religion was officially forbidden (Kononenko 2006: 46). The national consciousness of many Ukrainians was raised and their spirituality was built through their increased

interest in traditional (Eastern) Christianity, while many others were attracted by Evangelical missionaries.⁶ Contemporary Ukrainian Paganism is a response to this post-Soviet and pro-Christian situation.

East European Context: Inter-Group Relationships

In post-socialist settings, Paganism is not a uniquely Ukrainian phenomenon. This movement has also developed in Russia, Belarus, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Serbia, Poland, the Czech Republic, and other countries.⁷ Scholars studying these phenomena, although stressing unique local characteristics, point out that Paganism has become a response to a post-socialist identity crisis.⁸

An ethno-nationalist component distinguishes East European (and specifically Slavic) Pagans from many of their Western counterparts. Many Slavic Pagans view ethnicity as what Ivakhiv calls an “inherently territorial phenomenon” (Ivakhiv 2005b: 202-203) and consider this kind of ethnicity the basis of nationhood. East European scholars focus predominantly on the ethno-nationalist orientations and anti-Semitic sentiments of these phenomena.⁹

Slavic Pagans interact actively with each other as well as with their Western counterparts. Their attempts to unify on an international level are fueled, at least partly, by their need for political power, since the majority of Pagans occupy marginal positions in their larger societies, both in Eastern Europe and in the West. However, while sharing this political concern, Pagans often disagree about other issues. For example, the Tenth World Congress of Ethnic Religions took place in 2007, in Jurmala, Latvia, attracting Pagans from Lithuania, Poland,

Russia, Italy, Germany, England, and the USA. Ukraine was represented by Native Faith led by Halyna Lozko. *Svaroh*, a Native Faith periodical published by Lozko, comments on the reaction of these Ukrainian Pagans to certain issues addressed at the Congress:

In some cases, we were struck by pagan internationalism and rejection of nationalism. Americans blatantly propagated tolerance, pacifism, and other “general human” values. Understandably, Ukrainian Pagans are critical of such doctrines. (Anonymous 2007c: 7)¹⁰

In contrast, more narrowly focused Slavic gatherings such as the *Slavic Clan Council* [Родове Слов'янське Віче] and the *All-Slavic Congress* [Всеслов'янський З'їзд] most often result in the participants' consensus regarding their faiths, as well as views of ethnicity and religion.

The relationship of Ukrainian Pagans with their Russian counterparts is especially close and interesting. At the outset, both Ukrainian and Russian Paganisms (as well as other forms of ethnic nationalism) were nourished by the same sources: rediscovered nineteenth-century pro-Slavic literature; works of Russian and Ukrainian émigré writers (Volodymyr Shaian, Iurii Mirolubov, Sergei Lesnoi, Iurii Lisovyi and Lev Sylenko) that were actively republished in Ukraine and Russia in the 1990s; and *The Book of Veles* (Shnirelman 2002: 201).

Similar to its Ukrainian counterpart, Russian Paganism has evolved into a very diverse and dynamic movement, with a variety of different branches.¹¹ The present-day relationships between Russian and Ukrainian Pagans are as diverse as the movement itself. Originally, the two founding fathers of Ukrainian Paganism—Shaian and Sylenko—although disagreeing on many issues, both

viewed Russia as the main historical colonizer of Ukraine. Both wished to present Ukrainians as having unique characteristics, and emphasized their difference from Russians (Shnirelman, no date). Although this kind of thinking continues to dominate among many Ukrainian Pagans (especially among RUNVira adherents), many other present-day followers of the movement do not share these views. Halyna Lozko, while sharply criticizing some Russian Pagans for the imperialist connotations in their ideologies, actively cooperates with others. Among the latter is Pavel Tulaiev, editor of the Russian Pagan periodical *Atenei*.¹²

Volodymyr Kurovs'kyi actively cooperates with Russian and other Slavic Pagans. On several occasions, I observed Kurovs'kyi and his followers sharing the idea that all Slavs are brothers and sisters in blood who, when united, represent a great power. It is the enemies of the Slavs who impose controversial political ideas in order to separate and weaken them. Thus, Kurovs'kyi insists on the unity of all Slavic Pagans.

However, Kurovs'kyi's view of the central position in the "Slavic family" is very intriguing. Let me provide an example from the *Kupalo Wreath* [Купальський Вінок] festival organized by Ancestral Fire in Kyiv in the summer of 2008. The festival began a week prior to the actual Kupalo celebration (June 21). This week was filled with lectures, educational workshops, spiritual practices and preparations for the Kupalo night. There were many Pagan guests from other East European countries at the festival. The majority of visitors arrived from Russia.

I happened to observe the way that Ukrainian and Russian Pagans, led by the Ukrainian Volkhv Iarovyт, a close follower of Kurovs'kyi, were learning traditional Ukrainian Kupalo songs as part of their preparation for the upcoming Kupalo night. Some Russians experienced linguistic difficulties, especially with certain dialectic forms of these old songs. Iarovyт regularly switched from Ukrainian to Russian in order to explain the content of the lyrics. With an air of superiority in his voice, he presented (in Russian) Kurov'skyi's argument regarding the Ukrainian language.

Kurovs'kyi and his followers are convinced that, among contemporary Slavic languages, Ukrainian maintains the greatest number of linguistic features similar to the language spoken by the ancestors of all present-day Slavs. They support this by suggesting that the majority of contemporary Ukrainians speak at least two Slavic languages (Ukrainian and Russian) and understand all the rest. They also suggest that many Russians speak only Russian and have difficulties understanding other Slavic languages. Expanding on this, Ancestral Fire followers argue that, if Ukrainians have preserved the language of their ancestors most fully, then the sacred knowledge and traditions of old Slavs must be most fully maintained in Ukraine as well. Thus, in their opinion, Ukraine is “naturally” the spiritual centre of Slavic Paganism.

The Russian Pagans at the festival were not receptive to this idea. To avoid any potential conflict, one person suggested (in Russian): “Давайте лучше петь” [Let us sing instead!]. While most scholars would also disagree with this viewpoint, these creative interpretations of the past significantly influence the

dynamics of present-day relationships among Slavic Pagans. The fact that many are fluent in Russian is not seen as the result of Ukraine's colonial past, but as a marker of spiritual superiority. Native fluency in Russian helps the leaders of Ancestral Fire spread their messages and influences beyond present-day political borders¹³ and, in response to their colonial past, to make a major power shift - from the political centre in Moscow to the spiritual centre in Kyiv.

As we can see, the attitudes of Ukrainian Pagans towards their Russian counterparts are very diverse. These attitudes include complete rejection of anything Russian, cooperation with select Russian groups and even attempts by "the colonized" to enlighten "the colonizer."¹⁴ This list is not exhaustive.

Resistance to Christianity and Globalization

Like their Western counterparts, Ukrainian Pagans strongly reject Christianity. However, their reasons for this hostile attitude are different from those of Western Pagans. As discussed in Chapter I, Western Pagans, in line with their resistance to dominant social norms and conventions, are concerned with Christianity's hierarchical, patriarchal and institutionalized nature. Ukrainian Pagans, in line with their ethno-nationalist orientations and racist sentiments, reject Christianity as being a "foreign" Judaist religion or, as Sylenko often describes it, "nomadic Judaism" that was forcefully introduced to Kyivan Rus' by Prince Volodymyr. The following is Sylenko's reaction to an entry devoted to this event in the Primary chronicle:

"I [Prince Volodymyr] give the order to baptize [the people of Kyiv] tomorrow. Whoever does not show up at the river – rich or poor, worker or any

churl, will be my enemy,” [...] “will be deprived of his possessions and punished by death.” (*Primary Chronicle* quoted in Sylenko 1996: 26)

One had to disown one’s own, that which was sacred; to disown the holy things of one’s ancestors, and “with fear and trembling” to kneel and worship alien idols – icons depicting alien gods, brought from Greece. (*Sylenko* 1996: 27)

In Sylenko’s view, the foreign and oppressive nature of Christianity leads to the development of “false consciousness” in young Ukrainians:

...Ukrainian children go to school [and] open their ABC textbooks where Nazareth, not Kyiv, is given more space and attention. The teacher presents the first concepts to them, “When the star of Bethlehem appears in the sky, little Jesus will come to visit children...and there will be Holy Supper and caroling in every house.”

“I am a little Ukrainian girl” and “I am a little Ukrainian boy”¹⁵ – we glorify Nazareth, Bethlehem and the Jordan River. The first impressions of children, feelings, thoughts, and worries are devoted to non-Ukrainian holy things. Ukrainian children are happy that little Jesus is born; they become sad that he becomes crucified [and] then happy that he is resurrected. (*Sylenko* 1992: 3)

According to Pagans’ interpretations, Christianity as an external “foreign force” attempts to destroy the indigenous Ukrainian culture by blending it into a global cultural pattern, or, as Shnirelman puts it, “to play down ethnic differences and to indoctrinate its followers with a cosmopolitan attitude” (2002: 204).

Moreover, Ukrainian Pagans are concerned that Christianity contributes to the development of a “slave mentality” in Ukrainian people. Many of my interviewees point out that they originally belonged to Christian churches. They eventually parted with Christianity because they had never felt comfortable with being addressed as *slaves of God* [раби Божі] as is common practice in Eastern Christian Churches.

Mirroring Society

a) Individual and Collective

Like its Western counterpart, Ukrainian Paganism often absorbs the values and principles of the larger context in which it develops. In contrast to the idea of individualism emphasized in Western societies, Ukrainian society is more collective-oriented. Soviet influences on the promotion of collectivity over individualism cannot be underestimated. Consequently, while the idiosyncratic nature of Western Paganism reflects the individual-oriented larger Western society, Ukrainian Paganism is more collective in character. The majority of Ukrainian Pagans identify themselves predominantly in terms of their relationship to their communities [громади] as well as to their leaders. On several occasions, I observed that even if a split happens in a Pagan community due to personal conflicts, those who leave immediately initiate the creation of a new community. Solitary practitioners seem to represent a tiny minority in Ukrainian Paganism.

b) Institutionalization and Hierarchy

Unlike Western Paganism, its Ukrainian counterpart is institutionalized and hierarchical, with clear definitions of spiritual orders and social positions. To a great extent, Ukrainian Paganism is a religion of leaders and followers. The idea of institutionalization as understood by Ukrainian Pagans is closely related to their general political goals. While Western Pagans strongly resist many aspects of the state as an institution, the predominant mission of Ukrainian Pagans is to build a state. RUNVira and Native Faith adherents strive to create a new Ukraine on the

basis of the revived (as in the case of Native Faith) and reconstructed (as in the case of RUNVira) old Slavic polytheism. Ancestral Fire followers attempt to build a spiritual Slavic state [духовну Слов'янську державу] on the basis of ancestral traditions. The state is associated with institutionalization and hierarchy.

As state builders, Ukrainian Pagans do not resist existing state systems, but often imitate them. In fact, organizational structures of Pagan groups closely resemble those of the present-day Ukrainian state that consists of 24 administrative units called *oblasti* and the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. While *oblasti* have some political, economic and administrative autonomy, they are all controlled by the central political power in Kyiv. Ukrainian Pagan groups follow this centralized system. They usually have central offices (in Kyiv) and main leaders, followed by regional communities with local leaders who answer to the central offices. Ancestral Fire Pagans consciously make their organizational and hierarchical structures resemble that of the state. Volkv Mezhymyr Mykoliiaiv mentions in this regard:

Our hierarchy, as one of the main principles of Ancestral Fire worldview, will be built on the basis of the members' understanding of its necessity, not on the principle of personal loyalty or social or moral obligation to the leader. Strict hierarchy will coexist with self-government at the local level. In this way, our system will resemble a state organism that will serve as a good school for all of us.¹⁶

c) Gender

The notion of gender as communicated in Ukrainian Paganism also reflects the values of the larger society. While feminist voices have occupied a prominent

niche in Western Paganism, feminist issues are not explicitly addressed by Pagans in Ukraine. With the exception of a few narrow circles of the academic and cultural elite, one can often encounter very hostile attitudes towards feminism in present-day Ukrainian society (Pavlychko 1996: 305; Zhurzhenko 2001: 110). Solomea Pavlychko, one of the pioneers of the present-day feminist discourse in Ukraine, explains what she calls “conscious anti-feminism” and “unconscious sexism” in Ukraine by “the lack of democratic traditions, the underdevelopment of civil society and the low political culture of contemporary Ukrainian society” (Pavlychko 1996: 306). Pavlychko also emphasizes an influence of the Soviet regime on people’s hostile views of feminism:

During the last seventy years, the notion of women’s emancipation formed part of a highly unpopular socialist or communist totalitarian ideology, which was, moreover, of foreign (Russian) origin. Such ideas as the communist feminism of Aleksandra Kollontai, female emancipation and equality of the sexes were totally discredited by their Soviet practice, even though this equality existed only on paper. Feminism and emancipation are now politically dirty words. (Pavlychko 1996: 306)

Gender politics in contemporary Ukraine is dominated by what scholars define as neo-traditionalist views (cf. Zhurzhenko 2001: 109-131). Within this tendency, the family “acquires the status of the moral absolute” (Zhurzhenko 2001: 111). The woman is empowered within her domestic sphere rather than in the larger society. This view is especially reinforced with the help of the revival of old folkloric traditions. One of the most popular images of this mythology is the spiritual figure of *Berehynia*.

The origins of this figure have not been established. However, I cannot think of any other word associated with old mythology that has become more popular than the term *Berehynia*. In Ukraine, a radio program, a popular ethnographic journal, bookstores, kindergartens, cultural and educational projects all bear this name. In addition, a medical clinic in Kyiv, a shoe factory in Chernihiv, a furniture factory in Zaporizhzhia, and even a newly created variety of potato, are all called *Berehynia*. In Russia, *Berehynia* is also the name for a mineral water factory, an herbal product preventing the development of certain types of tumors, as well as a black terrier breeding kennel in the western part of Moscow. This list is exhaustive neither for Ukraine nor for Russia, and can be expanded by a simple online search of the term *Berehynia* [Берегиня – Ukr.] or *Bereginia* [Берегиня – Rus].

With the exception of a number of scholars (cf. Kis' 2003), hardly anyone in Ukraine questions the past existence of *Berehynia*, widely perceived as a Slavic Goddess. Great interest in this mythological figure developed in Ukraine shortly before and especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was popular ethnographer Vasyl Skurativs'kyi, who significantly contributed to the dissemination and popularization of this myth with his book *Berehynia* published in 1987. He further developed this image in another of his works, *Rusalii*, which appeared in 1996. Skurativs'kyi sees *Berehynia* as the female archetype of the “protectress of the family”:

...the ancient symbol has forever remained in the historical memory [of the people]...At all times and for all peoples, woman embodied the comfort of the family hearth: giving birth to and raising children, the preservation of family

traditions and customs, as well as maintaining order in the house. Her immeasurable love, tenderness and warmth inspired many generations of people to great heroic deeds, inspired the elevated thoughts of poets and philosophers, inspired industriousness among hunters and heroism among kings and warriors. (Skurativs'kyi 1996: 61)

Skurativs'kyi is convinced that the etymology of the word *berehynia* is connected with the Ukrainian verb *berehty*, meaning to preserve (Skurativs'kyi 1987: 7). In line with this etymology, Skurativs'kyi limits female authority to an exclusively domestic sphere. This interpretation of *Berehynia* contributes to the development of the patriarchal gender discourse in Ukraine.

In addition to being viewed as an ancient pagan Goddess, *Berehynia* is now greatly politicized. Marian Rubchak, an American feminist historian, discusses how this image has become “an instrument of women’s subjugation” in the contemporary Ukrainian political discourse, where male politicians address women as “bewitching, beloved, our own *Berehyni*” or “Woman-mother, Woman-wife, *Berehynia* of our people,” among other examples (Rubchak 2001: 149).

In Ukrainian society, the modern *Berehynia* myth “seduces contemporary Ukrainian women into a false sense of their own centrality even as it consigns them to inferior status” (Rubchak 2001: 149). A similar tendency can be traced in the contemporary Pagan discourse, especially in *Ancestral Fire*. For example, Lada and Volodymyr Kurovs'ki underline the role of the woman in the family in the following way:

Our dear reader, since ancient times your Ancestors sacredly respected the woman since she is naturally the *Berehynia* of the family who preserves

everything that her husband accumulated and brought into the family, clan and state. It is precisely the woman who passes on from generation to generation what our Ancestors-Gods gave to us long ago. (Kurovs'ki 2008: 6)¹⁷

The leaders of Ancestral Fire also attempt to control their female followers' moral behaviour. This is clearly reflected in Ancestral Fire's *Ladyni Rosy* (Lada's Dew), a sacred ritual for women who want to have children and especially for those who have difficulty conceiving. This ritual is performed by the Volkhvynia (or the Volkhv).

If a woman suffers from problems of infertility, she searches for help from the Volkhvynia. The Volkhvynia "reads" this woman's fate by looking at both her past and her future. She analyzes those moments in the woman's past that may be connected with her present infertility. One of the most severe "sins" is the loss of virginity outside of wedlock:

[In the past], [e]very girl had to know that the first man with whom she has an intimate relationship, leaves the image of his spirit and body in her. All the children that she has will be from this man's clan. This is why it was very important for a girl to share sacred wedlock only with her beloved husband. Those who were unaware of this while creating their families got themselves into great trouble. It happened that Mother Lelia, the Goddess of Love, through her pure and strong love, would cleanse those girls who were unwillingly dishonoured. However, this would not always happen because the couple needed to have very a light Spirit and Soul for it to occur [...]. (Kurovs'ki 2008:12)¹⁸

Within the Lada's Dew ritual, women bathe nude in the morning dew, hoping to be cleansed of their past misdeeds. (There is no cleansing ritual for men). The form of the ritual – bathing in dew – appears to be influenced by folk traditions associated with the holiday of St. Iurii (George) celebrated on April 23

(Julian calendar). According to folk beliefs, “Iurii’s dew” [Юрієва роса] has magical power. Villagers roll in “Iurii’s dew” in order to be healthy and beautiful (Chubynskyi 1995: 31). While defining the purpose of the ritual, Volodymyr and Lada, although they do not acknowledge their sources, apparently draw upon a popular psychological argument regarding an important role of one’s first sexual partner in the shaping and development of one’s future sexuality. They add a spiritual flavour to these physical and psychological matters,¹⁹ reflecting the dominating patriarchal views of the larger Ukrainian society.

The Lada’s Dew ritual leaves Ukrainian Pagan women with only one way to obtain power, namely, to follow all patriarchal norms, including the preservation of virginity until marriage, giving birth to children and taking care of their households. Constructed on the basis of the neo-traditionalist adaptation of folklore and psychology, Lada’s Dews represents what feminist scholars refer to as a trap for contemporary women:

Neo-traditionalist sacralization of motherhood and the reconstruction of the matriarchal myth becomes a trap that limits women's potential to the pre-given gender roles, creating an obstacle to the recognition of real discrimination problems. (Zhurzhenko 2001: 122)²⁰

Although the patriarchal paradigm in the Ukrainian gender discourse dominates in some Pagan communities, there is a response to the patriarchal discourse in the form of matriarchal narratives about the past. Although present-day Pagans in Ukraine do not explicitly address any feminist concerns, they often communicate these ideas more implicitly. To illustrate this, let me address the figure of Volkvynia Zoreslava, the ultimate authority of Native Faith. The

feminine gender word *volkvynia* is a relatively recent construct in the Ukrainian language. While there does not appear to be any primary information indicating the existence of female priests in old Slavic culture, Zoreslava's interpretation of this factor is very interesting.

While interpreting old archeological cultures, she focuses on one archeological artifact. It is a spindle, which was found among valuable golden and silver items within archeological excavations and which is dated approximately to the 7th – 8th centuries. To Zoreslava, its medium shows that “it was of a great value to its (female) owner” (Lozko 1995: 190). She further argues that the sacredness of old spindles is manifested in their form, since they were often covered with various sacred signs (sun, moon, and constellations), and used not only as tools for spinning but also for “observing heavenly bodies.” Thus, they “can be viewed as the attributes of the *volhkvyni* [pagan priestesses]...of traditional cults” (Lozko 1995: 191).

In this narrative, Zoreslava does not question the past existence of Pagan priestesses. Since spindles are associated with female crafts, she automatically surmises that this object belonged to a woman, reaching the conclusion that such spindles were important attributes for the *volhkvyni* of traditional cults (Lozko 1995: 190). Although Zoreslava does not explicitly address gender issues, she introduces her female perspective into her narrative by emphasizing the (supernatural) powers of specifically female leaders in the pre-Christian past. By doing so, she strives to legitimize her own gender authority as the Supreme *Volkhvynia* of present-day Ukraine. Zoreslava's liberating views are

communicated not only in her narratives about the past but also in practice, specifically, in the organizational dynamics of her communities. While in *Ancestral Fire*, the majority of regional community leaders are males of Kurovs'kyi's age – in their mid and late thirties, – the situation is very different in *Native Faith*. The majority of its regional leaders are of the age and gender of Volkhvynia Zoreslava – middle-aged women.

Although contemporary Ukrainian matriarchal and patriarchal myths about the past can be united by ethno-nationalist sentiments, they represent different perspectives. While men often project their masculine desires on the past and patriarchal women empower themselves by submitting to patriarchal rules, liberated women subvert dominating patriarchal interpretations of the past. Unlike feminist Pagans in the West, liberating women in Ukraine do not have a model of political feminism. Instead, these women introduce female perspectives in their narratives subtly and implicitly.

Ukrainian Paganism in the Context of New Religious (Revitalization) Movements

In his framework on “revitalization movements,” Anthony Wallace (1956) suggests that many religious phenomena begin as revitalization movements. Even present-day organized religions are the relics of old revitalization movements.²¹

Although different in their forms and visions, these movements share many characteristics. The contexts in which they take place, are often characterized by socio-political turmoil and stress (which is often the case for colonial settings). In such contexts, the world often becomes perceived as being in

trouble and in need of being saved. Revitalization movements and their charismatic leaders offer ideas and visions of how to restore order in society and/or how to cope with stress. To put it in Wallace's terms, "[a] revitalization movement is defined as a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture" (Wallace 1956: 265). Such movements are known to have taken place in various parts of the world.

Many Western Pagans and New Agers perceive their society as being in trouble or, rather, as being "sick" (cf. Hanegraaff 1998: 302; 330). (This is the reason many Pagan rituals are connected with the idea of "healing," whether mental or physical). Its illness is connected with the pollution of nature as a result of industrial progress, with dominant societal doctrines, racism, and other issues. June Mewhort begins her explanation of the "birth of a New Age" with the following statement:

There is turbulence in the world. The political picture is changing so rapidly that Rand MacNally, the famous map-makers, cannot keep up. Economic uncertainty has the whole world holding its breath, as a global restructuring unsettles the trading practices of the past and creates new, powerful alignments between blocks and nations. Socially, the people of the world are insisting on being involved in the issues of the day, from environmental protection to human civil rights. An exciting renaissance of the human spirit is under way, as self-empowered individuals join together to take control of their lives, their countries and their planet. (Mewhort 1992: iii)

Like their Western counterparts, Ukrainian (and other East European) Pagans also think that their societies are experiencing turmoil. The majority of Ukrainian believers, however, link their societies' present-day misfortunes with

the idea of lost ethnic roots and identity. The following comments of my interviewees exemplify these concerns.

Vira, a middle-aged female Pagan, works as a street vendor at the “informal market” on Independence Square [Майдан Незалежності] in Kyiv. This market is one of the rare places in Kyiv that creates an atmosphere for alternative thinking. In addition to selling Pagan literature, Vira actively engages in educational and propagandistic conversations with her customers. Although she belongs to RUNVira, Vira is also attracted by various forms of esoteric knowledge that are not generally characteristic of RUNVira. In her opinion, the Ukrainian nation is being destroyed by a variety of modern means:

Psychotropic weapons, immunization, Chernobyl (Chernobyl), [and] Coca-Cola destroy us... Our women get undressed because they are the best in the world...but they are silly because they think that this is fashion. Our girls get [...] beaten with negative energy in their bare midriff. This is being done in order to destroy the white population. And a 12-13 year old child ends up in the hospital for treatment of her reproductive organs...In the past, women were protected from these vampires by wearing necklaces, embroidered shirts, skirts, aprons, and belts in such a way that not a single vampire would reach their bodies. Now, a girl is given a bottle of beer and a cigarette and she no longer smells pleasant, but stinks. [...]. And she will have the same kind of a child...We are being destroyed, destroyed, and destroyed...

In Greek, *customs* [звичай] means morals. One who does not know one's customs is an immoral person.²²

However, Vira ends on the optimistic note:

They have a stranglehold on us but they will not asphyxiate us. Genetic memory will still manifest itself because it is still the heavens that rule us.²³

While responding to both historical colonialism and the present-day socio-political crisis in Ukraine, many Pagans propose concrete projects that, in their opinion, will help to overcome turmoil. One example is a Constitution of Ukraine published in the proceedings of the 7515 (2007) Annual Pagan conference *The Being of Ukrainians* [Буття Українців]. The project is devoted to “the future of Ukraine” and, according to its committee members, a copy was delivered to the Secretariat of the President of Ukraine, Viktor Yushchenko, in 2008. One of the greatest emphases in this Constitution is placed on the formation of the national idea [національна ідея] that is connected with deep knowledge and following of old traditions (resonating with Vira’s arguments), as exemplified in the following entry:

While taking into consideration our customs and academic research regarding the preservation of Ukrainian ethnic and family genes through maintaining virginity before marriage, through the genetic influence of the first sexual partner – the State provides active explanatory and propagandistic work regarding the maintenance of woman’s and man’s honour, dignity and purity. (Matviienko et. al 2007: 31)²⁴

L’viv-based Bohdan Klymchak, a political prisoner during the Soviet regime, is a very active adherent of RUNVira. He defines RUNVira as “the religion of the patriots of Ukraine.” Klymchak is convinced that, in order for Ukraine to overcome its present-day socio-political crisis, the country should honour its historical heroes, including the prisoners of the Soviet regime. He has designed a massive multilayered monument that would honour such individuals and contribute to historical awareness. He calls this pyramid-like structure Pantheon *Oaza-Hora* (Fig.4-1).

Whether or not contemporary Pagan visions and projects will help to “save” the Ukrainian nation remains a matter of speculation. I will hypothesize about the future of Ukrainian Paganism as a revitalization movement and will return to Wallace’s framework in the last chapter.

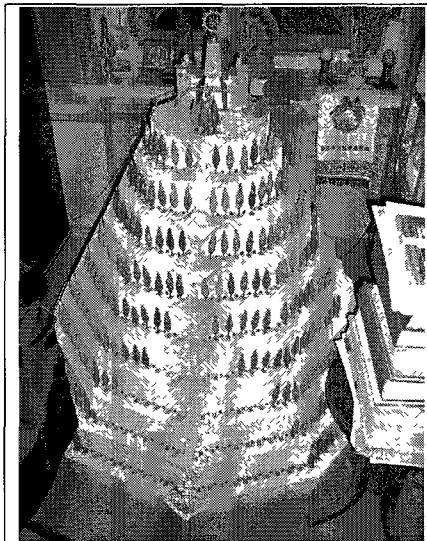


Figure 4 - 1. B. Klymchak. A model of Oaza-Hora displayed at the creator’s home.

¹ This state was a monarchy that existed between the 9th and 12th centuries and eventually branched out into the three major socio-political units that are now Russia, Belarus and Ukraine. A heated debate regarding Kyivan Rus’ and the issue of “ancestry” takes place within both popular and scholarly historical discourse, especially in Russia and Ukraine. For some general historical information on Kyivan Rus’ as presented by a Ukrainian scholar, see Subtelny 1988: 19-41.

² RISU 2009.

³ Ibid.

⁴ These figures are based on the information provided on the websites of the constituent administrative units of the Ukrainian Catholic Church in Canada. See UCCCa, UCCCb, UCCC 1996-2008, UCCC 2003-2009, and UCCC 2010.

⁵ See the websites of the following administrative units of the Ukrainian Catholic Church in the USA: UCC in the USAa, UCC in the USAb, UCC in the USA 2006, and UCC in the USA 2007.

⁶ For a discussion of the active development of religion in Ukraine and in other post-Soviet countries, see Steinberg and Wanner, eds. 2008. For a discussion of the resurgence of Evangelism in Post-Soviet Ukraine, see Wanner 2007. While traditional churches play an important role in the building of a national identity, Wanner, in her latter work, shows how Evangelicals, in contrast, build trans-national communities, overcoming political boundaries.

⁷ For discussions of Paganisms in various post-Soviet contexts, see Shnirelman, ed. 2001. For a general overview, see Shnirelman 2002: 197-211 and Shnirelman, no date. See also Kostello 2010. For a Ukrainian Pagan perspective on Pagan movements in Baltic, Slavic and other Eurasian countries, see Lozko 2006: 120-249.

⁸ See Shnirelman 2003: 4.

⁹ For a discussion of Russian Paganism as a nationalist movement, see Pribylovskii 2002; Shnirelman 2003: 3-14, and other works by Shnirelman indicated in footnote 7. For a discussion of specifically racist and anti-Semitic sentiments in Russian and Ukrainian Paganism, see Shnirelman 2005 and Ivakhiv 2005b: 213-214.

¹⁰ У деяких виступах впадав в очі язичницький інтернаціоналізм, дистанціювання від націоналізму, а американці відверто пропагували толерантність, пацифізм, та інші “общечеловеческі” цінності. Зрозуміло, що рідновіри України критично ставляться до подібних доктрин.

¹¹ For a discussion of various contemporary Russian Pagan branches, see Shnirelman, no date.

¹² For Halyna Lozko's perspective on various branches of Russian Paganism, see Lozko 2006 146-167

¹³ Catherine Wanner observes somewhat similar social dynamics among Evangelicals in the post-Soviet context. It is the knowledge of Russian language that make Ukrainian Evangelical missionaries (as opposed to their American counterparts) very successful in Russia and other former republics of the Soviet Union.

¹⁴ This idea is inspired by Catherine Wanner, who traces similar dynamics in contemporary Ukrainian evangelical missionary activities. Hundreds of Ukrainian evangelicals have visited Russia over the last ten years. The cultural and linguistic fluency of Ukrainian missionaries have proven to be very successful tools in this process. For details, see Wanner 2007: 212.

¹⁵ These are first lines of children's poems.

¹⁶ Наша ієрархія, як один з основних принципів світогляду Рідної Віри, будуватиметься на основі самоусвідомлення її потреби в особі рідновірів, а не на принципі особистої відданості чи соціального або морального зобов'язання перед провідником. Жорстка ієрархія співжитиме з широким самоуправлінням громад на місцевому рівні. Таким чином наша система нагадуватиме державний організм, що послужить хорошою школою для усіх нас (Mykolajiv 2008).

¹⁷ Дорогий мій читачу, споконвіку твої Предки свято шанували жінку. Адже вона за своєю суттю – берегиня роду і зберігає все те, що надбав і приніс у родину, рід, державу і чоловік. І саме жінка передає з покоління в покоління те, що колись давно дали нам Предки-Боги.

¹⁸ [В минулому], [к]ожна дівчина відати мала, що в перший раз з чоловіком еднаючись, залишає він у ній свій образ духа і тіла. Від того усі діти, яких вона народить, будуть з роду того першого чоловіка. Тому було дуже важливо вперше на священне подружнє ложе лягти саме із коханим мужем своїм. Горі тим, хто цього не видав і рід творив. Але бувало, що матінка Леля, Богиня Любові, через любов чисту і сильну очищувала дівчат, з якими, з якими мимоволі біда безчестя трапилася. Але відбувалось це не завжди, оскільки для цього потрібно подружжю мати Дух і Душу дуже світлі []

¹⁹ Amy DeRogatis traces a similar tendency in Evangelical sex manuals that spiritualize sex “by both accepting and rejecting scientific theory and practice” (2009: 279).

²⁰ Неотрадиціоналістическая сакралізація материнства і реконструкція матриархального міфа оказується ловушкою, замикающою їх в предзаданості традиційних гендерних ролей, перешкоджає усвідомленню реальних проблем дискримінації (Zhurhenko 2001: 122).

²¹ Wallace recognizes several kinds of revitalization movements: *nativistic, revivalistic, cargo cults, vitalistic, millenarian and messianic*. Loretta Orion compares forms of Western Paganism to Wallace's “nativistic” movements (Orion 1994: 25-27).

²² Знищують нас психотропна зброя, прививки, Чорнобиль, кока-кола. Роздягають наших жінок, бо вони найкращі в світі. І думають вони, дуренькі, що – це мода. Те, що наших дівчаток роздягли і б'ють енергетично за день – пупи відкриті – б'ють їх разів двадцять за день – це для того, щоб знищувати білошкіре населення. І дитинка 12-13 років, вона вже у лікарні лікує дитородні органи. [К]олись від цих вампірів закривались намистом, сорочкою-вишиванкою, спідницею, фартухом ще й поясом так, що не добереться ні один вампір [] Тепер спеціально дівчині дали цигарку в руки і пляшку пива, і вона не пахне, а смердить. Отаку і дитину вона буде мати. У нас іде знищення і знищення, і знищення.

Звичай – це називається по грецьки мораль, а не звичайна людина, яка не знає звичаїв – це аморальність.

²³ Нас дуже-дуже душать, але не задушать. Генетична пам'ять все рівно буде проявлятися тому, що нами ще керує небо.

²⁴ Враховуючи звичаєві та наукові дослідження щодо збереження етнічно-родової генної складової національних особливостей українців, через дотримання цнотливості до шлюбу і народження дітей, через генетичний вплив першого статевого партнера – Держава забезпечує широку пояснювальну та пропагандистську роботу щодо дотримання дівочої та чоловічої честі і гідності, цнотливості.

CHAPTER V

“We Haven’t Given Up What Is Ours...”:

Past and Present in Dialogue

Concept of Unbroken Tradition: *Emic* Perspective

Fascination with the past closely unites East European, including Ukrainian, Pagans with their Western counterparts. However, as previously discussed, over the course of their history, the majority of Western Pagans have made a journey from “authenticity” to “creativity.” Although they continue to draw inspiration in the past, many Western Pagans have found peace with the idea that their religion is new. Moreover, many even encourage and promote creativity in their interpretations of the past and in their present-day practices.

In the case of Slavic Pagans, it is important to distinguish between the *emic* and *etic* perspectives in regards to the notion of creativity. While Western Paganism is now considered a new religious movement from both the insider’s and outsider’s perspectives, it is only to outsiders that Slavic Paganism appears to be a modern construct. Many Slavic Pagans would argue strongly against this view. In order to better understand this issue, I propose to distinguish between *self-conscious* creativity in the case of Western Pagans and the *unselfconscious* creativity of their Ukrainian counterparts, with the exception of RUNVira adherents (who consciously restructure the old Slavic Paganism).¹

The concept of “unbroken tradition” is extremely important for many Ukrainian Pagans (it resonates with the ideas of the first British Wiccans, who

strove to prove the continuity of their practices with those of the past). It helps them justify their present-day visions and practices and, simultaneously, to reinforce the authority of their leaders. Native Faith followers emphasize the significance of “unbroken tradition” in their narratives about the initiation of Pagan leaders. As mentioned in Chapter II, the Kyiv-based leader of Native Faith, Volkhvynia Zoreslava (Halyna Lozko), was initiated by Canada-based Myroslav Sytnyk, himself a successor of Volodymyr Shaian, the founder of this religion. While commenting on this event, Zoreslava’s follower, Svitoiar, emphasizes the important role of Zoreslava in the maintaining the tradition of the “golden chain” [золотого ланцюга]. The tradition “symbolizes the eternal inheritance of the spirit of ancestors” that had existed from ancient times, “until Prince Volodymyr broke the golden links of this chain in 988, when he executed the leading Volkhvy of [Kyivan] Rus” (Svitoiar 2001: 14). According to Svitoiar, the contemporary revival of the broken “golden chain” takes place through the laying on of hands on a future Volkhv(ynia) who, in turn, teaches and ordains his or her successors, “ensuring the continuity of the tradition and inheritance of spiritual links.” Volkhvynia Zoreslava is a bearer of this tradition who ensures its continuity. Svitoiar is convinced that Native Faith is revived according to “ancestral right” because it follows the “golden chain tradition,” while all the other Pagan groups “that chaotically appear in Ukraine are amateur” (Svitoiar 2001: 14). Among those groups and leaders whose positions are undermined by Native Faith followers is Volodymyr Kurovs’kyi and his Ancestral Fire.

According to the Native Faith sources, Kurovs'kyi swore an oath and was initiated by Zoreslava as a *Zhrets'* of Native Faith on September 8, 2002. This event was preceded by an official letter of request to accept the Podillia-based branch of Cossack-sorcerers, headed by Kurovs'kyi at that time, to Native Faith. The letter included the following:

Dear Volkvynia, now, when we are better acquainted with you personally and when we can see who we are, [...] [we] made a decision [...] to ask you to accept our association of Cossack-sorcerers to Native Faith. On our part, **we ensure you** that:

- **We consider ourselves to be native believers, followers of Native Faith, revived by the Great Volkhv Volodymyr Shaian; [...]; we recognize Volkvynia Zoreslava and all her canonic successors as the higher moral and spiritual authorities in the questions of religion and faith; we consider ourselves to be part of the world movement of Ukrainian Pagans [язичники] and wish to belong to the Native Faith Association of Ukraine [emphasis – original].**

[...] We are ready to accept ritual blessings into Native Faith on the basis of the canonic traditions of Native Faith [emphasis in the original]. (Anonymous 2003: 68)²

Zoreslava and her followers treat Kurovs'kyi's eventual separation from Native Faith as the “breaking of the oath” and, by extension, as disconnection from the “golden chain” of ancestral tradition. This invalidates Kurovs'kyi as a leader and Native Faith adherent in the eyes of other Native Faith followers.

Kurovs'kyi, in turn, also actively promotes the idea of the “unbreakable tradition of the past” as reflected in his own narratives about his position. While Zoreslava emphasizes the initiation ceremony through which she obtained her present position, Kurovs'kyi draws upon the folkloric idea of the oral

transmission of traditional (or ancestral) knowledge. As mentioned in Chapter III, Kurovs'kyi often emphasizes that he is a “hereditary” Volkhv because in his family, the tradition of Pagan priesthood [Волхівство] has never been interrupted. It is important to note that this narrative is deeply embedded in the consciousness of Ancestral Fire followers. While discussing their allegiance to Kurovs'kyi, many of my interviewees emphasized Kyrovskyi's hereditary knowledge as one of his major virtues.

The above examples represent the *emic* perspective, illustrating that, for many Ukrainian Pagans, it is important to think of their beliefs and activities as “inherited” from ancestors, rather than “invented” or “created.” Pagans legitimize the “authenticity” of their practices with the help of either “initiation narratives” (in the case of Native Faith) or by the “acquisition of knowledge narratives” (in the case of Ancestral Fire).

Etic Perspective: Reconstructionist and Appropriationist Paradigms

Let us now look at Ukrainian Paganism in its relationship to the past and to ancestral traditions from an outsider's perspective. In contrast to Western Paganism, where the *Eclectic* paradigm dominates in the adaptation of particular ethnic traditions, Slavic, including Ukrainian, Paganism is largely connected with the *Reconstructionist* model. Many Slavic Pagans associate “cultural borrowings” with undesirable “foreign” influences on their “pure” ethnic identities.

Ukrainian Paganism reveals greater complexities in relationship to “cultural borrowings” than those embraced by Strmiska's *Eclectic* and

Reconstructionalist paradigms. Some Ukrainian Pagans, especially the representatives of Ancestral Fire, appropriate elements from other cultures. However, Ancestral Fire followers are convinced that these elements originally constituted parts of the traditions of their ancestors, and do not treat them as foreign. In line with Strmiska's framework, I propose to call this phenomenon the *Appropriationist* paradigm in Paganism.

One can find some overlap between the *Appropriationist* and the *Eclectic* patterns, since both are connected with the idea of "cultural borrowings." However, a significant difference between the two lies in insiders' attitudes. Many Western representatives of the *Eclectic* paradigm consciously adapt elements from various traditions to their present-day spiritual activities and openly recognize this. In contrast, Ancestral Fire Pagans claim borrowings to be "authentically" Ukrainian.

Let me provide an example of the way academic theories in the field of psychology are adapted by some Ukrainian Pagans. From July 17 until July 20, 2008, I visited Ancestral Fire's summer camp held in the village of Rashtivtsi in the Ternopil' region, Ukraine. The campers' daily activities included workshops and classes on a variety of topics, including folk arts and crafts, folk medicine, and martial arts.

The leaders of Ancestral Fire regularly delivered lectures addressing various theoretical issues regarding Slavic spirituality. In line with this group's orientation towards traditional family values, many presentations were devoted to family relationships. Volodymyr Kurovs'kyi gave a talk on various psychological

types and their compatibility. He emphasized that one's awareness of these psychological types helps one to successfully find one's soul mate, to understand his or her spouse on a deep level and, thus, to avoid psychologically traumatic family experiences.

While explaining socionic types and intertype relations within a family, Kurovs'kyi makes a parallel between the theory of socionics and the wisdom of the ancestors of contemporary Slavs.³ According to Kurovs'kyi, what later became a theory in the field of psychology was originally a folk tradition called *Rodolad* [Родолад]. The first half of the word is *Rod* (Clan). The second part, *lad*, signifies "order." Thus, to Kurovs'kyi, the term *Rodolad* implies maintaining order in the family. This leader is convinced that the distant ancestors of contemporary Slavs possessed the wisdom and *knowledge* [знання] of secrets of human interrelationships. As he stated during the lecture, "socionics equal *Rodolad*."

Kurovs'kyi emphasized that, according to his experience and *knowledge*, the happiest couples represent the most compatible psychological types. He stressed, however, that such couples are a rarity today. People often make thoughtless, rash decisions regarding their relationships. Kurovs'kyi is convinced that the ancestors of contemporary Slavs never had such problems because they relied on the tradition of *Rodolad* and, thus, were much more judicious in making their choices. He strives to legitimize his view by referring to rural folklore. In particular, Kurovs'kyi focuses on the Ukrainian wedding tradition as was still practiced in late 19th – early 20th century Ukrainian villages and has been well

documented by ethnographers.⁴ The tradition consisted of three major phases: pre-wedding, wedding and post-wedding. Although specific traditions varied from region to region, each of these phases were complex and multi-staged all across Ukraine. For example, the pre-wedding phase alone included several parts: *inquiries* [допити]; *matchmaking* [сватання]; *inspection* [оглядини]; *betrothal* [заручини]; *marriage banns* [заповіді]; *dowry* [віно]; *invitations* [запросини]; *decoration of wedding tree* [гільце/дерево]; *baking of wedding breads* [коровай]; *maiden's evening* [дівич вечір]; and *wreath-weaving* [вінкоплетення]. Each of these stages, in turn, included a complex of relevant sub-rituals.

According to Kurovs'kyi's interpretations, each wedding stage gave the couple an opportunity to get to know each other better and, thus, to be more considerate in making important decisions. This example illustrates how Kurovs'kyi combines ethnographic and psychological findings (which he Ukrainianizes) to introduce the ancient tradition of *Rodolad* as a foundation for present-day Ancestral Fire beliefs.

Martial arts as employed by some Pagans, especially Cossack-sorcerers, can serve as another example of the *Appropriationist* paradigm in Ukrainian Paganism. The most widely known figure in the world of contemporary Ukrainian martial arts is Volodymyr Pylat. He is considered the Founder and Supreme Teacher of *Boiovyi* [Combat] *Horak*, a historical dance that has become a label for Pylat's present-day physical and philosophical Ukrainian martial arts system of whose major principles are:

...fighting for truth and against the forces of Darkness and Evil in the name of the victory of Light, Goodness and Love – positive creative powers that help the Universe to grow, as well as contributing to the creation of the most perfect forms of life and helping transform the physical into the spiritual. (Pylat 2008 [1999]:18)⁵

Pylat has his own School of *Boiovyi Hopak* in L'viv, where he offers classes of martial arts at various levels of complexity. Although he emphasizes that the *Boiovyi Hopak* School is a non-religious institution, Pylat himself belongs to RUNVira. He is highly respected, not only by his fellow RUNvira followers but also by other Ukrainian Pagans, for his talent and contribution to the revival of ancient Ukrainian traditions.

Boiovyi Hopak does not receive much attention in Ukrainian academic literature devoted to dance. The fullest description is provided by Andrii Humeniuk (1963). His discussion of this dance is based on his fieldwork as well as Ukrainian folk songs and literary works that mention Ukrainian folk dances. Humeniuk does not use the term *boiovyi* in regards to *hopak*, but he does hypothesize that this dance originated during Cossack times. This hypothesis is based on the visual form of the dance that includes many elements resembling martial movements (Humeniuk 1963: 97). Humeniuk's research reveals several steps and movements that constitute both the Cossack-style and more recent *hopak*.

Intriguingly, the number of steps and movements described by Humeniuk appears very small in comparison to that provided by Pylat in his book *Combat Hopak: Requirements for the Zhovtiak level of proficiency* [Бойовий Гопак вимоги на рівень майстерності Жовтяк] (2008 [1999]). Another impressive

aspect of this book is connected with the specific names of the constituent elements of *Boiovyi Hopak*. Pylat's linguistic choices largely resonate with those of Ancestral Fire leaders. They are influenced by the old Slavic language of primary sources, older-sounding Ukrainian (as spoken in western Ukraine before the Soviet times) as well as Pylat's attempts to Ukrainianize martial arts to the greatest possible degree. His language, although understandable to contemporary Ukrainian speakers, differs markedly from present-day literary Ukrainian.

Although in his *Boiovyi Hopak*, Pylat draws upon those elements that are associated with historical *hopak*, he also incorporates many "cultural borrowings," simultaneously Ukrainianizing those. Even though the forms and exact origins of particular elements in Pylat's *Boiovyi Hopak* require more in depth research, the "foreign" roots of many are obvious. As previously mentioned, the spiritual, physical and linguistic richness of Pylat's present-day practices markedly exceed available historical evidence. In addition, Pylat is familiar with and strongly influenced by non-Ukrainian traditions, especially Eastern martial arts. This is reflected in his conscious attempts to make *Boiovyi Hopak* fit the standards of contemporary international martial arts systems (Pylat 2008 [1999]: 17). It is also known that Pylat received his initial training in Eastern martial arts, as mentioned in the (anonymous) introductory article to Pylat's book:

Before he began to revive *Boiovyi Hopak*, for seventeen years, Volodymyr Pylat studied Kyokushin Karate, and was a sensei for eight years. Simultaneously, Volodymyr studied such styles as Goju Ryu, Shudokan, Karate, Kickboxing, Jujutsu, Aikido. (Pylat 2008 [1999]: 5)⁶

It is important to note that the author acknowledges Pylat's initial training in order to stress his expert knowledge. There is no mention about how Pylat applies his knowledge of Eastern traditions to the development of *Boiovyi Hopak* and how this reflects on the form of his dance and philosophical system. *Boiovyi Hopak* is rather presented as an authentically Ukrainian phenomenon, and the "hereditary" aspect of Pylat's knowledge is strongly emphasized. In particular, the author stresses the roles of Pylat's father and grandfather, who introduced the first elements of Ukrainian martial arts to him (Pylat 2008 [1999]: 5-6). Pylat came to appreciate their contribution only later in life, after having received formal training in Eastern martial arts:

Fighting elements that were shown to Pylat by his grandfather or father appeared irrational and sometimes even unreal to Volodymyr at first sight. Only much later, after having acquired rich experience in the field of martial arts, the Teacher [Pylat] came to understand the content of these elements. He became firmly convinced that this is a very powerful technique that, if applied properly, is able to cause miracles and can enable one to defeat any adversary. (Pylat 2008 [1999]:6)⁷

With the help of Volodymyr Pylat and Eastern martial arts elements, a historical dance, *hopak*, has become not only visually but also ideologically attractive, having acquired the status of the dance "...in whose movements not only spirituality and mysticism of ancient times but also a harmonious system of the old martial arts of [...Ukrainians'] ancestors is preserved" (Pylat 2008 [1999]: 5).⁸

Eastern mysticism and meditative techniques also attract Ancestral Fire followers. They strive to legitimize their own worldview and system of values by claiming these practices connected with the traditions of their ancestors. Perhaps

the most intriguing example emerged during my informal conversation with a young male adherent of Ancestral Fire. He mentioned that yoga, although it may have had a different name, was invented by the ancestors of present-day Ukrainians.

Unknown “Other”: Obscurity of the Past

a) The Past Contested

Slavic Pagans borrow from other cultural traditions because their own past is largely obscure. While some ethnic cultures have richly documented information about their ancestors, contemporary descendants of the old Slavs have not inherited such a legacy. As illustrated in Chapter II, the existing data about the old Slavs, especially their spiritual beliefs and practices, are obscure and fragmentary.

The largely obscure past becomes the unknown “other” that attracts curious minds and opens horizons for creative interpretations. Because of the obscurity of the past, various leaders provide differing depictions of it, projecting their own personal views and desires. Victor Shnirelman defines this process as the “invention of the past” [изобретение прошлого] (Shnirelman, no date). In Pagan interpretations, it is often difficult to prove a given interpretation of the past wrong because the past largely unknown.

Because of its obscurity the past becomes contested. Slavic Pagans do not always reach consensus in their views of present-day spiritualities because different imagined pictures of the past often come into conflict with each other. One of their disagreements is related to food as involved in sacrificial practices

and festive occasions. The majority of Ukrainian peasants bring sacrifices to their Gods and Goddesses only in the forms of agricultural products, believing that their ancestors were agriculturalists who never presented human sacrifices. However, they disagree on the topic of food consumption in relationship to their present-day spiritualities. The representatives of Native Faith eat meat and consume alcohol, as, in their opinion, did their ancestors. In contrast, Ancestral Fire adherents find the consumption of these products unnatural, arguing that their ancestors were always of sober mind and did not kill animals.⁹

To provide another example, Native Faith leader Volkhvynia Zoreslava strongly criticizes the leaders of Ancestral Fire for borrowing ideas from other traditions. She is convinced that such elements as esotericism, mysticism and magic were foreign to the ancestors of contemporary Ukrainians (Lozko, May 23, 2007). Russian Pagan Volkhv Veleslav, the leader of the Rodoliubiie Russian-Slavic Native Faith Community [*Русско-Славянская Родноверческая Община "Родолубие"*] and one of the most widely published Pagan leaders in Russia,¹⁰ is also concerned about “cultural borrowings.” He criticizes Slavic Pagans who incorporate esoteric practices and claim these to be the elements of their ancestral religion. Veleslav defines this situation as “the dissemination of an informational parasite into Native Faith [запуск[ом] в Родную Веру информационного паразита]” (Veleslav 2009b: 258).

Differing views of the past, related to conflicting visions of the future, result in spiritual diversity in the present and, therefore, in new dynamic cultural forms, even within the same ethno-religious movement.

b) The Past as “Golden Age”

Although they disagree with each other regarding specific interpretations, all Ukrainian Pagans consecrate their ancestral past, viewing the pre-Christian period on the territory of contemporary Ukraine as a “golden age.” Among others, Anthony Smith, a scholar of nationalism, defines a “golden age” as a particular era in the history of a nation recognized for its significant contributions to the development of that nation (Smith 1996: 583). The “memories of a ‘golden age’” are characterized by “exaggeration, idealization and heroization...” (Smith 1996: 583).

Smith hypothesizes that the better a “golden age” is documented, the more influence it can have on later periods and generations (Smith 1996: 583). This theoretical model does not seem applicable to Ukrainian Paganism, where the opposite is usually true. It is the most unknown period in the past that attracts the attention of Pagans. To them, the more distant the past, the more valuable it is. In simple terms, older means better. The obscurity of the distant past gives Pagans more freedom in their interpretations.

References to pre-historic eras help Pagans view themselves as a legitimate ethnic community. Let us recall the example of the Pagan calendar. RUNVira, Native Faith, and Ancestral Fire, although each using different points of departure in their chronologies, begin these chronologies with archeological cultures. Stressing the “primordial” origins of the present-day Ukrainian nation helps Ukrainian Pagans to legitimize their present-day religious worldview and to claim their superiority over Christianity. By emphasizing how much older their

chronologies are from that of the Christians, they strive to diminish the status of Christianity as a new religion that is only two thousand years old.

Defending the Past

Pagans do not only develop their own idealized visions of the past but also defend the past from those interpretations that may potentially undermine the Pagan discourse.¹¹ They struggle for the most positive image of their ancestors. I witnessed an interesting example of this at a Pagan gathering devoted to the 100th anniversary of Volodymyr Shaian on July 31, 2008 in L'viv. The representatives of various Pagan streams attended this event. Many of them delivered speeches underlining Shaian's contribution to the development of modern Paganism and discussing various present-day Pagan concerns. In her talk, Antonina Lytvyn, an adherent of Native Faith and a known cultural activist, referred to the famous Ukrainian folk song "The Cossacks Rode Along" [Їхали козаки] aka "Song about Halia" [Пісня про Галю]:

The Cossacks were returning home from the Don River, they tricked Halia and took her with them. Oh, Halia, young Halia, they tricked Halia and took her with them.¹²

Go with us, with us Cossacks, it will be better for you than at home with your mother.

Halia agreed and joined them, and they took Halia into the dark woods

They took Halia into the dark woods and tied her braids to a pine-tree

The Cossacks went about the forest and collected kindling, and burned the pine-tree from top to bottom

The pine-tree burns and rages, Halia cries out, cries out and says:

"Oh, whoever is in the woods and can hear me, let him save me, and those who have daughters, teach them.

And those who have daughters, teach them, and do not let them out in the dark of night.¹³

Lytvyn argues that the lyrics of this song as known and widely sung today (both in villages and by professional musicians) are twisted or, as she puts it, “forged” [підроблені]. Lytvyn strives to popularize a different version of the lyrics:

The Khazars were returning from trading and battles, tricked Halia and took her with them.

Beautiful girl, come with us. It will be better for you than at home with your mother.

Halia agreed and climbed aboard their wagon, and they took Halia into the dark woods.

They stopped to rest in a dark valley, and there they disgraced the Ukrainian daughter.

They tied Halia’s braids to a pine-tree and set the pine-tree on fire and rode off.

Halia screams and shouts: “Oh, whoever is in the woods and can hear me, let him save me.”

Halia screams and says: “And those who have daughters, teach them, Fathers and mothers, teach your daughters with whom they can deal and who they should stay far away from.”¹⁴

Lytvyn comments on this version:

[...] When I was little, I came to my grandfather because I had heard the song “Oh, Halia, Young Halia.” [...]. I was so struck to hear that the Cossacks take a girl away and tie her braids to a pine-tree, considering that we perceived the Cossack as something sacred. The Cossack is a protector who would always defend a girl.

I do not know who the author of this song is but I heard this version from my grandfather Trokhym Mykytovych Harmash who was born in 1879. [Men in] his family were Cossacks for many generations. Although the Cossacks did not exist at that time any more but [his] grandfathers nourished that memory and tradition. (Lytvyn, July 31, 2008)¹⁵

It is obvious that the Khazars “got under the skin” of our people. Each intruder began to be called Khazars, not necessarily only the Hazaria Kaganat... My grandfather told me [this]...

This was a moralistic song in character. It was sung at all the parties for the girls to consider. Just listen: “The Khazars were returning from trading and battles...” These are the ones who trade and, to this day, are still tormenting us, those who have money and deceive our girls. These are “shufrychi,” “tabachnyky”... (Lytvyn 2009)¹⁶

Lytvyn’s narrative addresses several issues. Pagans view the Cossack period in the history of Ukraine as another “golden age.” Lytvyn finds certain interpretations of the Cossack past to be a forgery because they do not fit with Pagans’ own image the Cossacks. Pagans perceive Cossacks as great warriors and noble defenders of their motherland and its people, and not violators and ravishers as they are portrayed in the widely known version of the “Song about Halia.” Negative characteristics can only be attached to the enemies of the old Slavs – the Khazars, a Turkic tribe. Lytvyn also makes a link between the historical enemies of Ukraine and their present-day counterparts. As she mentions, “Khazar” has evolved into a generic term to describe any intruder or oppressor. Lytvyn refers to some present-day representatives of the economic and political spheres in Ukraine as “shufrychi” and “tabachnyky.” These are derogatory terms based on the names of well-known contemporary figures Nestor Shufrych and Dmytro Tabachnyk, who, among others, are often accused of questionable financial dealings that keep the rest of the country on the edge of poverty. Consequently, Lytvyn treats such people as the “other” – enemies and not “true” Ukrainians – who are responsible

for Ukraine's present-day economic crisis. "True" Ukrainians would not treat their fatherland in such a way.

In her article on this topic, Lytvyn accuses the Soviet regime of eliminating the "Khazar" version of the "Song about Halia" from people's memories:

This was some time in the 1930-1940s, before the war. There was a showcase of amateur artists in the Kyiv region, and a choir participated, either from Tarashcha or from the Bila Tserkva county, I am not sure. The choir sang this song, using exactly these lyrics [about the Khazars]. After the showcase ended, the members of the choir disappeared and their fellow villagers did not have any information about these people.¹⁷

While telling the same story at the gathering devoted to the 100th anniversary of Volodymyr Shaian, Lytvyn mentioned that all the members of the choir were exiled to the Siberia, where Soviet concentration labour camps were situated. Lytvyn does not provide a source for this information and, thus, it is impossible to verify it against historical records, especially if she is not exactly sure where this choir was from.

In Ukrainian post-Soviet society, narratives, informed by historical evidence, about Soviet persecution of individuals for cultural practices that did not fit the official Soviet discourse, circulate widely. Lytvyn places her story within this model of post-Soviet narratives. Her fellow Pagans do not see any need to question the historical accuracy of her story since it fits a familiar pattern of discourse.

Let us now focus on the lyrics of the two songs. In Lytvyn's version, the phrase "And there they disgraced the Ukrainian daughter" has a clear political

(national) connotation. The term “Ukrainian” had not been used in its present-day political sense until the middle of the 19th century. In contrast, the widely known version does not carry any political message but, rather, provides a social warning. It appeals to young females, warning them not to trust strangers; Halia represents a generalized image of young naïve females. Lytvyn’s version emphasizes a different idea. Halia becomes the “Ukrainian daughter,” a metaphorical image for both historical and present-day Ukraine, oppressed and “raped” by its enemies – the “Khazars.”

It is difficult to determine the origins of any folk text. Hypothetically, since Lytvyn’s version carries a political connotation, the mid 19th century would be the earliest possible time of its origin. The exact age of the widely known version of the “Song about Halia” is also unknown. There is no evidence to ensure that it did not appear later than Lytvyn’s version. However, the striking aspect of Lytvyn’s narrative is her claim that it was the version about the Khazars, and not the one about the Cossacks, that had been widely known before its words were eventually “forged” by the Soviets. If this is true, it means that the version about the Khazars was eventually completely eliminated from peoples’ memories. (It cannot be found in existing collections of folk songs. I have not heard it sung in Ukrainian villages).

It is a known fact that the lyrics of many Ukrainian folk songs, especially Christmas carols, were altered by the Soviets to fit the secularist Communist regime. In these altered forms, they were propagated within the official discourse of the Communist Party. However, the original lyrics of these songs could still be

heard in Ukrainian villages, albeit in secret They were actively revived after the collapse of the Soviet Union The fact that Lytvyn's version is unknown in Ukraine suggests that it could be a contemporary Pagan creation, rather than an old folk song However, the age or authenticity of this song variant is not as important as the Pagans' desire to cleanse the past of any unfavourable interpretations Cossacks, as the ancestors of contemporary Ukrainians, must be portrayed as heroes because, to paraphrase Maria Carlson, by imagining who you were you determine who you are ¹⁸

¹ RUNVira's attitude towards creativity is discussed in Chapter IV

² Тепер, коли ми ближче познайомились особисто з Вами, шановна Волхвине, коли Ви змогли побачити, якими є ми, [] [ми] прийняв[и] рішення [] просити Вас визнати конфесійну належність Характерного Козацтва України до Української Рідної Віри Зі свого боку ми, з повною відповідальністю за свої слова, заявляємо, що

- **Визнаємо себе рідновірами, послідовниками Української Рідної Віри, відродженої Великим Волхвом Володимиром Шаяном[...]; визнаємо вищий морально-духовний авторитет Волхвині Зореслави та усіх її канонічних наступників, в питаннях релігії та віровизнання; визнаємо себе частиною світового руху українських язичників та бажаємо належати до Об'єднання Рідновірів України.**

[] Оголошуємо про свою готовність прийняти обрядову посвяту в рідновіри за **канонічними традиціями Рідної Віри.**

³ The field of sociotics that developed on the basis of Jungian psychological typology is introduced in Chapter II

⁴ The following description of traditional Ukrainian weddings is based on the summary by Foty at al 2007 This catalogue also includes bibliographic information on the major ethnographic sources devoted to Ukrainian weddings

⁵ [] правдобрство, потужна зв'язка із силами Темряви і Зла в ім'я торжества Світла, Добра і Любові – позитивної творчої сили, що сприяє розширенню Всесвіту, творенню найдосконаліших форм життя, трансформації тілесного в духовне

⁶ Перш ніж почати роботу над відродженням Бойового Голака, Володимир Пилат упродовж сімнадцяти років вивчав кюкушин карате, з них вісім років був сенсеєм Паралельно з кюкушином п Володимир вивчав такі стилі, як годзю-рю, соне, шотокан, карате, кік-боксинг, джиу-джитсу, айкідо

⁷ Елементи боротьби, котрі показували В Пилату дід чи батько, на перший погляд п Володимиру здавалися нерациональними, а іноді й нереальними, лише згодом набагато пізніше, коли за плечима був великий бойовий досвід, до Учителя [В Пилата] прийшло розуміння їхнього змісту і значення, і він остаточно переконався, що це є досить потужна техніка, яка за умови правильного використання здатна творити чудеса і давати можливість з легкістю перемагати будь-якого суперника

⁸ у традиційних рухах [якого] збереглася не тільки духовність і містика глибини тисячоліть, а й гармонійна система древнього військового мистецтва наших пращурів

⁹ I do not focus extensively on Pagan food because it did not appear as a very striking component of the rituals that I observed. The ideological, educational, and sacred aspects of Pagans' practices seemed to receive the greatest amount of attention while food was treated more as a physical necessity.

¹⁰ See Veleslav 1999, 2001, 2005a, 2005b, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2008a, 2008b, 2009a, and 2009b, among his other works.

¹¹ Sometimes, Slavic Pagans, like their Western counterparts, even engage in heated debates with academics. See, for example, Zobnina et al., no date.

¹² Each following stanza ends with the phrase "Oh, Halia, young Halia" followed by the phrase from the previous (second) line.

¹³ Їхали козаки із Дону додому, підманули Галю, забрали з собою.

Ой, ти, Галю, Галю молодая, підманули Галю, забрали з собою.

Поїдемо з нами, з нами, козаками, краще тобі буде, як в рідної мами.

Галю погодилась, з ними споченилась, та й повезли Галю темними лісами.
Везли, везли Галю темними лісами, прив'язали Галю до сосни косами.

Розбрелись по лісу, назбирали хмизу, підпалили сосну, із гори до низу.

Горить, горить сосна, горить і палає, кричить Галю криком, кричить, промовляє:

"Ой, хто в лісі чує, нехай той рятує, а хто дочок має, нехай навчає.

А хто дочок має, нехай навчає, та й темної ночі гулять не пускає."

¹⁴ Їхали хозари із торгу з розбою, підманули Галю – забрали з собою

Дівчинонько гарна, поїхали з нами, краще тобі буде, як в рідної мами.

Галю погодилась, на віз почепилась, і повезли Галю темними лісами.

Стали спочивати в темному ярочку. Там і оганьбили українську дочку.

Прив'язали Галю до сосни косами. Запалили сосну. Поїхали сами.

Кричить Галю криком, кричить репетує: "А хто в лісі чує – нехай порятує."

Кричить Галю криком, кричить промовляє, а хто дочок має, нехай навчає.

Навчїть, батько й мати, із ким дочкам знатись, а кого здалека треба обминати

¹⁵ ...Коли я була малою, я прийшла до діда, бо почула пісню "Ой ти, Галю, Галю молодая."
Всі ви її знаєте. І так мене вразило, що козаки забирають дівчину і прив'язують до сосни косами, як в нас було священне – козак. [Козак] - це, навпаки, захисник, завжди дівчину захищав.

Автора пісні не можу сказати, але цей варіант я почула від свого діда Гармаша Трохима Микитовича, 1879 року народження. Він козак із діда-прадіда. Хоч козацтва вже тоді не було, [...] але діди підтримували ту пам'ять і традицію.

¹⁶ Видно, хозари дуже в'їлися під шкіру нашим людям. Справа в тому, що хозарами почали називати всіх зайд, не обов'язково це отой Каганат Хозарський...Мій дід казав...

Це якраз була пісня моралістичного характеру, яку співали на всіх вечірках, щоб дівчата прислухалися. Ви ж послухайте: "Їхали хозари із торгу з розбою." Це ж ті, хто торгує, хто й досі у нас на шії, ті, хто має гроші і обманює наших дівчат, шуфричі, табачники...

¹⁷ Ibid. Це було десь у 1939-1940 роках, перед війною. На Київщині був огляд художньої самодіяльності, і, здається, чи з Таращі, чи з Білоцерківського району був хор. Хор виконав натурально оці слова. Після закінчення огляду односельчани не знали, де вони й ділися.

¹⁸ Carlson, while discussing contemporary Russian Pagans' idealistic interpretations of the past on the basis of *The Book of Veles*, argues Pagans, while constructing their self-respecting national identity, follow the principle "you change who you were, you change who you are" (Carlson 2009).

CHAPTER VI

Glory to Dazhboh (Sun-God) or to All Native Gods?:

Monotheism and Polytheism in Contemporary Ukrainian Paganism¹

Among many disagreements between Ukrainian Pagans regarding spiritual and ideological issues, one of the major debates involves polytheism and monotheism as models for building a contemporary national identity and spirituality. The categories of monotheism and polytheism become instrumental in the formation and negotiation of alternative national identities among Ukrainian Pagans.

Rethinking the Past: Monotheism vs. Polytheism Debate in Ukrainian Paganism

Since the problem of monotheism versus polytheism is communicated most evocatively between two major streams, namely RUNVira and Native Faith, the following discussion will focus predominantly on these two organizations. Their conflict regarding monotheism and polytheism dates back to the roots of present-day Ukrainian Paganism and is connected with the visions of its two founding leaders – Volodymyr Shaian and Lev Sylenko. As pointed out earlier, Shaian's Native Faith followers believe in many different spiritual beings that are each in charge of particular natural forces and spheres of life. Lev Sylenko reworked Shaian's ideas, having proclaimed Dazhboh as the only God of the true Ukrainian religion.

Let me illustrate how these leaders and their followers justify their spiritual choices and convictions. Sylenko mentions the following:

Like other peoples, Rusychi-Ukrainians were originally polytheistic [...]. Dazhboh was one of numerous gods within these beliefs. *Volkhvy* did not care about the unity of lands and tribes of Ukraine-Rus'. They treated the intentions of the Great Prince of Kyiv [Volodymyr] to unite all the tribes around Kyiv with malevolence. Belief in many gods was going through a moral crisis in Ukraine-Rus, which could not be stopped by pagan priests. (Sylenko 2005 [1998]: 10)²

Sylenko's followers summarize the ideas of their Prophet regarding monotheism in the following way:

Polytheism is a lower form of religion, which existed 5-7 thousand years ago, and which still exists among tribes...in [some] backward parts of our planet. Already 2500 years ago such leaders as Zarathustra, Confucius, Buddha, Mohammed [and others] moved away from polytheism, establishing the concept of One God among their peoples (Sylenko1996a: 18-19).

Ukrainians have two understandings of God. Firstly, a thousand years ago Dazhboh was one of the numerous gods in the polytheistic faith of Ukraine-Rus. This was a religion of a lower form, like any polytheistic religion. Secondly, however, Prophet Lev Sylenko is the first Person to introduce the Ukrainian understanding of One God named Dazhboh. Dazhboh is Almighty and Eternal. He has no need of any ambassadors in the forms of higher or lower gods. RUNVira is the faith of higher spiritual perfection. It represents absolute monotheism (Sylenko1996a: 20).³

Lev Sylenko himself wrote:

A Ukrainian, who is able to think, does not identify the understanding of God as introduced by Prophet Sylenko in RUNVira with that understanding which existed 1000 years ago in polytheism. There is a higher form of monotheism in RUNVira (Sylenko 2005 [1998]: 10).⁴

As we can see, Sylenko legitimizes his religious reform by thinking in evolutionary terms and stressing, in particular, that monotheism represents a higher level of human spiritual development than polytheism. On the basis of the

information presented in primary chronicles, Sylenko argues that polytheism, as practiced by the ancient Slavs, experienced a moral crisis; it resulted in conflict and the separation of various Slavic tribes due to their pluralist religious views (Sylenko 1995: 9). He considers his reform of old Slavic polytheism a step towards spiritual and cultural progress for contemporary Ukrainian people.

Thus, the followers of RUNVira appear to be more future-oriented, emphasizing the idea of progress, considering that their mission is to advance the faith of their forefathers. This attitude can be illustrated by an encounter at the tri-annual Congress of RUNVira that was held at the newly built temple in the village of Bohoiavlens'ke. During the breaks between administrative meetings and holy services, delegates of the Congress socialized outside the Temple. During one such social gathering, I was given an album of reproductions of paintings by the Ukrainian artist Viktor Kryzhanivs'kyi commissioned by Ancestral Fire (Kryzhanivs'kyi 2004 (7511)).

These images represented various polytheistic themes, predominantly the gods and goddesses of the old Slavic pantheon. Each reproduction was accompanied by a detailed explanation of old beliefs connected with particular spiritual beings as interpreted by the Ancestral Fire followers today (the publication of this album was initiated by this particular group). For example, from these reproductions one can learn that Lada is the Goddess of universal harmony and the protectress of birth, women, marriage, harvest and fertility. Dana is the Goddess of heavenly water and rivers as well as the female origin of the world, who descended to earth, accompanied by fire and light, during the birth of

the Universe given by Lada. Kupailo is the God of summer solstice, love and married couples and connected with water and fire. In total, there are seventeen images presented in this album.

As I was flipping through these pages, admiring the contemporary artistic interpretations of the past, one male RUNvira adherent approached me. He began to comment on the paintings with an air of superiority in his voice: “This is all *iazychnytstvo* (paganism). Think about it. We cannot believe in various forest, field and water spirits today. Yes, our ancestors believed in these things but we should not any longer.” His comment emphasized that he and his RUNvira colleagues view the doctrines and practices of their polytheistic counterparts as backward and past-oriented.

The term *iazychnytstvo* (paganism) as used by this person and other RUNVira followers deserves special attention. While this term is widely accepted on both the academic and popular level within western Pagan discourse in regards to both old and new polytheistic beliefs and practices, its closest Ukrainian equivalent, *iazychnytstvo*, is strongly rejected by the followers of RUNVira and some other groups. On the one hand, they explain this attitude by the negative connotation imposed on it by the Christian church, which equated it with barbarianism. On the other hand, since they wish to emphasize the difference between the faith of their forefathers and contemporary RUNVira, considering RUNVira to be an advanced version of the old Slavic faith, they introduce different terminology. In particular, they prefer to be called *runvisty* (believers of RUNVira) or *ridnoviry* (native believers).

In contrast to this, while completely accepting the term *ridnoviry*, the followers of Native Faith also embrace the term *iazychnytstvo*, interpreting it their own way and “cleansing” it from its Christian connotation. For example, Halyna Lozko provides her own definition of this term, applying a comparative linguistic method. In particular, she stresses that the root of the term *iazychnytstvo* is *iazyk*, which means “tongue” in contemporary Ukrainian, but which also meant “language” as well as “a tribe, a people who share one language” in old Slavic languages. This term has a Greek equivalent signifying *ethnos* (Lozko 1998: 48). The latter argument leads her to link the concept of *iazychnytstvo* to that of *ethnic/native* religion:

Ethnos – is a community of people who have common territory (native land), common language (native language), common kin, legends about its origins, common historic memory, customs and rituals, namely – a native religion. Thus this term [*iazychnytstvo*] is connected with ethnic (national) religion as the basis for spiritual culture for every people. (Lozko 1998: 48)⁵

Let me now focus on some other factors that distinguish polytheistic Native Faith adherents from their monotheistic RUNVira counterparts. While RUNVira members tend to consciously modify their ancestors’ worldview, Native Faith followers fully idealize and consecrate the past. They strive to legitimize their contemporary beliefs and practices by emphasizing direct continuity with ancient polytheistic traditions and thus, “authenticity.” Halyna Lozko views contemporary Paganism in Ukraine as a “direct inheritor of the old paganism, differing from the latter only by some modernized way of communication of the same primordial laws.” Lozko rejects the term *neo-iazychnytstvo* (neo-paganism).

In her opinion, the prefix “neo,” if added to the term *iazychnytstvo*, symbolically deprives the Native Faith adherents of their “hereditary rights for the continuation of [their] tradition” (Lozko 2007b:3).

While emphasizing the significant role of the past in the continuation of this tradition in her book *Ethnology of Ukraine* [Етнологія України] (2001), Halyna Lozko strongly disapproves of Sylenko’s reform. In this publication, she provides two charts, one of which is entitled “Monotheism and polytheism as binary oppositions,” where she generalizes and contrasts these two religious worldviews. She states that monotheistic religions “are established artificially by [their] founders (‘prophets’)” while polytheistic religions “appear in a natural way as ethnic, national religions, developed by a people itself” (Lozko 2001: 282).⁶ In the second chart, entitled “Comparative chart of neo-religion [this is how Lozko defines Sylenko’s faith] and Ukrainian ethno-religion [this is how she views the stream of Paganism she adheres to],” Lozko criticizes Sylenko for “cancelling all the Ancestral Gods, proclaiming absolute monotheism, and using the native name of Dazhboh, attaching his own characteristics to this God.”⁷ Thus, Lozko views Sylenko’s RUNVira as “new, modern and reformatted” while the Native Faith, in her opinion, is “traditional” (authentic, customary, ancient, ancestral) and “natural” (created by the Ukrainian ethnos over a span of many millennia of its history) (Lozko 2001: 282).⁸ As we see, the followers of the polytheistic paradigm attempt to undermine the beliefs and practices of their monotheistic counterparts by characterizing them as creative and, thus, “regressive.” From the etic perspective, however, as illustrated throughout this work, it is clear that the

followers of polytheistic Native Faith are at least as creative as their monotheistic RUNVira counterparts.

Indigenizing the terms “Monotheism” and “Polytheism”

Monotheism and polytheism were recognized in the field of religion in the past as two major contrasting frameworks for the spiritual development of humanity. These models owe their popularity in academic discourse especially to the adherents of the sociocultural evolutionist theory. The latter introduced the idea that the monotheistic model represented a higher stage of evolution of human thought than polytheism.⁹ This idea, however, is challenged by many present-day (western) Pagans who purposely search for their distant polytheistic roots while constructing a contemporary spirituality.¹⁰ As for present-day academics, the spiritual development of humanity, especially the evolutionist framework, is no longer a prominent theme within contemporary Western scholarly discourse in religious studies. It is, rather, regarded as a legacy of the past. Instead, contemporary scholars more often concentrate on individual societies and changes characteristic for their specific contexts, rejecting the evolutionist model of social progress. However, while being considered a legacy of the past, evolutionist ideas have proved to shape present-day spiritualities, as our case study demonstrates. In fact, in the case of the RUNVira phenomenon, an evolutionist framework has formed the foundation for this new ethnic religion.

The terms *polytheism* and *monotheism* as used today (not necessarily in lines with evolutionist discourse) in regards to religious beliefs and practices are

also being challenged by academics. Some contemporary scholars question their relevance to complex spiritual worldviews and practices (including the idea of The Trinity in (theoretically) monotheistic Christianity). In particular, theologian Laurel Schneider in her book *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* goes back to the origins of these terms to argue against their validity. She points out that both categories are modern constructs and not ancient terms. They both were introduced in the 17th century and carried a strong political rather than spiritual connotation. In particular, the concept of monotheism was presented as a means of establishing the religious and cultural superiority of Europe and Euro-America in the early modern context by “charting monotheism as an advance over polytheism” (Schneider 2008: 22). Agreeing with Mark Smith, Schneider points out that these two terms are interdependent and the term “polytheism” acquires meaning only when juxtaposed to “monotheism” (Schneider 2008: 21; Smith 2001: 11). Like Smith, Schneider finds these terms anachronistic when applied to ancient contexts. She sees the “problem of monotheism-polytheism binary” to lie “in the reductive quality of all binary distinctions and the limitations they place upon otherwise much more complex and shifting realities” (Schneider 2008: 20). In her opinion, one has to be very careful in applying modern concepts to non-modern contexts since a significant amount of indigenous meaning can be lost in such a case (Schneider 2008: 21). This problem is also often addressed by anthropologists.

The specific case of Ukrainian Neo-Paganism discussed in this work contributes to the discourse on polytheism vs. monotheism in a profound way

since it demonstrates even greater complexities in people's spiritual experiences in the modern world. It turns out that both models can coexist and influence each other in the complex process of identity negotiation even within the same religious movement, at least on the ideological level.

I find Schneider's emphasis on the political nature of the terms "polytheism" and "monotheism" and on the limitations that they can place on people's spiritual worldviews and practices very important. Indeed, these terms often do not come from the people themselves. However, this is not the case for Ukrainian Pagans discussed in this work. Contemporary Ukrainian Paganism is a modern religious movement with strong political connotations. The terms "polytheism" and "monotheism" may be anachronistic when applied to old Slavic paganism since it is doubtful that the old Slavs consciously thought about themselves in these terms. However, the categories of polytheism and monotheism both seem completely appropriate for contemporary Ukrainian Pagans who consciously embrace them. In fact, for Ukrainian Pagans these concepts become an important part of the formation of a modern national identity. On the one hand, both Pagan monotheists and polytheists construct this alternative identity through the formation of an alternative spirituality, juxtaposing their ideas to those of the larger (predominantly Christian) Ukrainian society. On the other hand, as was illustrated above, with the help of the categories of monotheism versus polytheism they negotiate this identity between themselves, debating who can offer the best version of "Ukrainianness."

While doing this, contemporary Ukrainian Pagans charge the terms “monotheism” and “polytheism” with their own new meaning (as they do other terms such as *iazychnytstvo* (paganism)) and thus, indigenize them. As pointed out above, Lev Sylenko was greatly influenced by the European superiority discourse (mentioned by Schneider) as communicated through the concept of monotheism. However, he imparts the term with his own connotation. As also pointed out earlier, Sylenko presents Ukrainians as not only part of a superior European community but as a superior nation who now shows the path of spiritual progress to the rest of Europe:

Humanity languishes in the darkness: it is absolutely necessary
To feed its brain with new food.
Ukraine is called by Heavens
To show Europe the new way [of spiritual development]. (Sylenko 1996b: 7)¹¹

Sylenko and his followers understand spiritual progress to lie in the “European understanding of God” which implies the reformulation of particular ethnic religions into monotheism. Thus, RUNVira followers associate Sylenko’s reform of old Slavic beliefs with the advanced thinking of a progressive people. In contrast to this, Native Faith adherents view monotheistic religions as foreign forces attempting to destroy indigenous Ukrainian culture by forcing it to conform to a global cultural pattern. For these people, only polytheism represents a progressive model for building their contemporary indigenous spirituality. In the context of present-day Ukrainian Pagan discourse, the terms “monotheism” and “polytheism” become helpful linguistic means for communicating contemporary ideologies. They come from the people.

¹ An earlier version of this chapter constitutes the main part of an article published under the same title in *Pomegranate The International Journal of Pagan Studies* (see Lesiv 2009)

² У русичів – українців, так як і в усіх інших народів, було багатобожжя (нижча форма релігії) і Дажбог був у них одним із численних богів. Волхви не дбали про єдність земель і племен України-Руси і недобррозичливо ставилися до прагнень Великого Київського князя об'єднати всі племена навколо Києграда. Багатобожжя на Україні-Русі переживало моральну кризу, яку не могли зупинити волхви.

³ Багатобожжя (політеїзм) – нижча форма релігії, яка була 5-7 тисяч літ тому, і яка тепер є в [деяких] відсталіх закутках нашої планети. І вже 2500 літ тому передові світочі людства Заратустра, Конфуцій, Будда [та інші] відійшли від багатобожжя, утверджуючи між своїми народами концепцію Єдиного Бога.

В українців є два розуміння Бога. Перше – тисячу років тому Дажбог був одним із численних богів у багатобожній вірі України-Руси. Це була релігія нижчої форми, як і кожна релігія політеїстична []. І друге розуміння – Пророк Лев Силенко є першою в історії Людиною, яка свистила українське розуміння Єдиносущного Господа з ім'ям Дажбог. Дажбог – Всюдисущий і Всевічний. Він не потребує амбасадорів у формі більших чи менших богів. РУНВіра є релігією вищої духовної довершеності. У РУНВірі абсолютний монотеїзм.

⁴ Українець, здібний думаний, не ототожнює розуміння Дажбога, зване Пророком Силенком у РУНВірі, з тим, яке було 1000 літ тому в багатобожжі. У РУНВірі є вища форма монотеїзму.

⁵ Етнос – це спільнота людей, що має спільну територію (рідну землю), спільну мову (рідну мову), спільні родові легенди про власне походження, спільну історичну пам'ять, звичаї й обряди, тобто – рідну релігію. Отже, це слово пов'язане з етнічною (національною) релігією як основою духовної культури кожного народу.

⁶ Монотеїзм створюється штучно засновниками ("пророками") []. Політеїзм виникає природним шляхом як етнічна, національна релігія, вироблена самим народом.

⁷ Силенко скасував усіх Предківських Богів, проголосив абсолютний монотеїзм, використав рідне ім'я Дажбога, надавши йому своєї особистої авторської характеристики.

⁸ РУНВіра – неорелігія (нова, сучасна, реформована). Рідна Віра – традиційна (автентична, звичаєва, стародавня, Предківська).

⁹ One of the earliest proponents of this theory was the 19th – early 20th century English anthropologist Edward Tylor (1843). While speculating about the origins of religion, Tylor introduces the following evolutionary chain for the spiritual development of humanity: dreams, ghost-souls (as explanations of dream images), spirits (animism), polytheism and monotheism. His model suggests that monotheism is the logical result of human thought that evolved from simple beliefs into more complex religious ideologies. At the same time, Tylor also believed that the development of science would eventually completely overcome religion. E. Tylor, J. Frazer and other evolutionists believed that all societies follow the same pattern of development towards social progress, although this progress is reached by different societies at different times.

¹⁰ For examples, see the studies by Luhrmann 1989, Magliocco 2004, Strmiska, ed. 2005, Reid, ed. 2006, among many others.

¹¹ Людство томиться в темі/ Конче треба мозок кормом новим годувать/ Україна покликана Небом/ Шлях Європи новий показать.

CHAPTER VII:

“Where Else Is Such a People?”:

Ukrainian Paganism as an Alternative Vision of Nation¹

Rituals, Symbols and Community

a) Creating a Sense of Belonging

Although interpretations of the past form a very important part of the Pagan movement, it is not ideology alone that contributes to its growth. People need *real* experiences to help them develop a sense of connection with their past and of belonging to their community and their nation. Rituals play a dominant role in the creation of these experiences.

Anthropologist David Kertzer discusses the role of symbols and rituals in the process of the construction of a large-scale community – the state. Kertzer draws upon the ideas of sociologist Emile Durkheim (1965) (who, while distinguishing between the sacred and the profane, emphasizes the social nature of religious rituals), and defines ritual as “standardized, repetitive, symbolic behavior” (Kertzer 1991: 86). His discussion is further focused on those aspects of ritual that are important in the political struggles of new forces against existing regimes. Kertzer considers ritual one of the symbolic weapons in the power struggle associated with the process of state formation (1991: 85).

Drawing upon Mary Douglas’ idea that “[s]ocial rituals create a reality which would be nothing without them” (Douglas 1996: 62 quoted in Kertzer 1991: 87), Kertzer underlines four important political purposes of ritual. They are “organizational integration,” “legitimization,” “construction of solidarity,” and

“inculcation of political beliefs” (Kertzer 1991: 87). Kertzer argues that both the idea of the state and that of the citizen can only be represented symbolically. The symbols can be of various kinds, including particular clothing, songs, icons, and flags. However, it is through rituals that the meaning of symbols is created and reinforced. By wearing certain clothes, singing certain songs and/or carrying particular icons or flags, people develop a special attachment to them, simultaneously communicating their allegiance to a certain community (Kertzer 1991: 87). Kertzer’s framework can help us to understand how Ukrainian Pagans develop a sense of belonging to their community and their nation by creating experiences with the help of rituals.

Let me return to the Pagan *khoda* (procession) described in the Introduction and focus specifically on the visual symbols involved. Over the last several years, the *khoda* became a traditional ritual of many Pagans in Ukraine. These processions take place annually on Ukraine’s Independence Day in the context of state celebratory activities. Usually, various Pagan groups begin their celebrations with sacred ceremonies near their respective shrines and then walk through the central streets of Kyiv. Their final destination is the monument to Taras Shevchenko. Near the monument, Ukrainian Pagans usually pay homage to Shevchenko and also deliver speeches expressing their current political, social, and religious concerns.

The *khoda* has indeed become what Kertzer would call “standardized, repetitive, symbolic behavior.” It serves as a symbolic weapon for contemporary Pagans who strive to undermine the existing pro-Christian regime and promote

their own vision of the Ukrainian nation. Through political symbols such as the Ukrainian national emblem, the trident, and the Ukrainian national flags carried by participants, the adherents of Native Faith communicate a sense of belonging to a large-scale community – the Ukrainian nation. However, by combining state symbols with those representing Pagan visual interpretations of old Slavic mythology (such as a stylized sun – the symbol of Dazhboh, the Sun-god), Ukrainian Pagans simultaneously offer their own – alternative – vision of this nation. Their vision is connected with the revival of the distant past, and specifically with pre-Christian beliefs and practices as they once existed in the territory of present-day Ukraine. While (re)creating the past through standardized symbolic behavior, Ukrainian Pagans create their present reality, simultaneously legitimizing their vision and forming what Kertzer calls a sense of “group solidarity.”

Through their rituals and particular symbols, Ukrainian Pagans reinforce a sense of belonging to their own present-day Pagan community and identify with their distant ancestors. For example, the adherents of Ancestral Fire, while paying tribute to their Gods and Goddesses, often include the songs of Zhyvosyl Liutyi, a contemporary songwriter and bandura player and an active member of Ancestral Fire. Both the lyrics of these songs and the collective ritualized sing-along (usually holding hands and walking in circle around the fire) bridge the past and the present. An example of one such song follows:

We haven't given away what is ours, we haven't destroyed our Old Gods,
We established a house for them, treating them as our great grandparents in our
prophetic home.

There is an iconostasis in our house, and we bow sincerely
Before all those, who protect us, who give us hope and faith.

Whatever may have happened in the world, whatever centuries may have passed,
We have carefully listened and waited for the time when those whom we saved
would say to us: “For the cause of good”²

And our astute mentality prayed aloud and silently
To *Iarylo* for the blossoming steppe and to *Veles* for the ears of rye.

To *Svaroh* for the fire in our souls, to *Berehyni* for protective talismans
We allowed nature, not idols, to live in our holy family.

Water spirits and forest spirits – we haven’t even burned the unclean force³
And house spirits live in the houses that we have sanctified.

Well, where else is there such a people, who are connected with the living and the
eternal,
Who, like the immortal and wise soothsayer, have tied themselves to the earthly
and to the cosmic?

No, we haven’t given up what is ours, we have just dug in our roots
At all times, they gave us strength against misfortune.
We haven’t broken our Kin, and for this our God has saved us.⁴

For Pagans, these lyrics express a sense of pride in belonging to both the
unique community of the old Slavs and to that of the present-day Ukrainian
nation.⁵ Together, both are imagined as an organic whole. Benedict Anderson
aptly points out that a national community “is imagined because the members of
even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet
them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their
communion” (Anderson 1991 [1983]: 6). In the case of Ukrainian Pagans, this
imagination expands not only to the fellow-members of the contemporary
Ukrainian national community or to those that are within people’s historical
memory but also to those who lived in the territory of present-day Ukraine in
“pre-historic” times and of whom very little is known. For Ukrainian Pagans the
imagined achievements of their imagined ancestors communicated through

particular symbols within particular rituals form the core of the unique Ukrainian nation (“Well, where else is such a people...?”). In other words, the Pagans’ vision of the Ukrainian nation is connected with its native religion, whose roots were “buried” (by the Christian church) and now are being rediscovered. Collective ritual singing allows Pagans to develop the view of their ancestors (and themselves as their descendants) as what Smith would call “chosen people,” an ethnic community “entrusted with a sacred mission to proselytize or crusade or act as standard-bearer of the true faith” (Smith 1996: 586).

b) Consolidating Beliefs

Rituals also help Ukrainian Pagan communities to consolidate their beliefs. While focusing on the relationships between ritual and belief, Kertzer emphasizes their inconsistency, arguing that regimes can promote symbols but they cannot control beliefs (Kertzer 1991: 90). “Consistency comes through common action, not only because each of the participants have different beliefs, but also because each of the participants has a formless morass of conflicting beliefs” (Kertzer 1991: 90). Kertzer provides the example of those Germans who initially refused to give the Nazi salute but who gradually developed a feeling of belonging to this regime through “regular reenactment of the rite” (Kertzer 1991: 90).

The great variety in creative interpretations of the past results in an inconsistency of Ukrainian Pagan beliefs. However, through common actions, Pagans create common experiences that, in turn, contribute to the development of

common beliefs within a particular community. For example, unlike other Pagans, Ancestral Fire followers often emphasize the importance of their life-long allegiance to a spiritual leader. Volodymyr Kurovs'kyi, who strives to maintain centralized power in Ancestral Fire, stresses that whoever performs the ritual of name-giving - usually either Kurovs'kyi himself or one of his closest followers - becomes a "spiritual father" to new Pagans for the rest of their lives.⁶

Another example is connected with the Ancestral Fire's idea of *Rodolad* and psychological types. As a result of Kurovs'kyi's ritualistic workshops and interactive lectures on this topic, many Ancestral Fire followers speculate about their family and social relationships in terms of compatible or incompatible psychological types. This idea is foreign to both Native Faith and RUNVira followers since the doctrines of these groups do not address psychology theories.

c) Creating Collective Memories

Rituals play a significant role in the creation of collective memory in Ukrainian Pagan communities. Sociologist and anthropologist Paul Connerton addresses the issue of collective memory while discussing "commemorative ceremonies" as a type of ritual. Connerton touches upon the performative characteristics of rituals rather than on their expressive nature. Similar to David Kertzer, he focuses on certain symbolic features of these rites.

While addressing the notion of memory in its relationship to commemorative rituals, Connerton emphasizes that rites have a tendency to be repetitive and "repetition automatically implies continuity with the past"

(Connerton 1989: 45). However, what distinguishes commemorative ceremonies from other kinds of rituals “is that they do not simply imply continuity with the past but explicitly claim such continuity.” Commemorative ceremonies shape communal memory (Connerton 1989: 45), often “re-presenting” rather than just “representing” the past (Connerton 1989: 43).

The rite performed near the monument was a commemorative ceremony devoted to Shevchenko. While paying homage to Shevchenko on Ukrainian Independence Day in 2006, the leader of Ancestral Fire Volodymyr Kurovs’kyi said:

Let us perform the holy ritual of unification with our Ancestors! We have a powerful spiritual leader of our family, Taras Shevchenko, who glorifies our family with his spirit, his holiness and his wisdom, and who teaches our family! We know that wisdom is rooted in Veles, and thus the power of Veles talks to us through Taras’s words! Thus, let the spirit of Veles be united with the spirit of Taras today!

In primary sources, the pagan god Veles is known predominantly as a god of beasts and cattle as well as the protector of trade. The hypothesis that Veles was also the god of poetry, music, and other creative arts belongs to Metropolitan Ilarion (1965). This idea is based on *The Lay of Ihor’s Campaign*, where the bard Boian is referred to as Veles’s grandson (Ilarion 1965: 105). Contemporary Pagans have further developed this idea (cf. Lozko 2005 [1995]: 136), and many of them now consider Veles the patron of arts and creativity. This is the reason Kurovs’kyi made the connection between Veles and the poet Taras Shevchenko in his speech. In this way, Shevchenko’s contributions to the development of the Ukrainian nation were “re-presented,” shaping the participants’ collective

memory about this historical figure and eternalizing Shevchenko as their hero and messiah. I will return to the figure of Shevchenko as perceived within the contemporary Pagan discourse after addressing some other important characteristics of Pagan rituals.

d) Establishing Boundaries

While Pagan rituals and symbols contribute to the consolidation of beliefs within a group, the development of collective memory and a sense of belonging, they can simultaneously establish community boundaries. David Cohen considers rituals and the symbols incorporated in them to be “symbolic markers” of community boundaries (Cohen 1985: 50-63). He argues that symbols tend to establish these boundaries. While creating a sense of belonging, rituals and symbols can also create a sense of otherness (Cohen 1985: 53). While Pagan symbols are easily recognized by insiders, their meaning may not be explicitly understood by outsiders. In the case of the annual *khoda*, while outsiders could easily relate to Ukrainian national symbols displayed, many viewed the Pagan procession with an expression of surprise or confusion. They could not understand the way Pagan elements combined with national symbols. This combination created both a sense of belonging and a sense of otherness for both insiders and outsiders simultaneously.

Heroes and Messiahs

Among the Spiritual Giants (to use Sylenko's terminology) glorified by Ukrainian Pagans, Taras Shevchenko occupies perhaps the most prominent place. He belongs to what Kertzer defines as a reservoir of potent symbols that every culture possesses (Kertzer 1991: 89). Kertzer emphasizes a tendency of new political forces "to claim those symbols as their own" and a tendency for such appropriation to become legitimized via rituals (Kertzer 1991: 89). This is exactly what has happened in Ukraine with the figure of Taras Shevchenko. At different times in history, he served as a symbol for ideologically opposite political forces. While studying this phenomenon, critics have even introduced the term "struggle for Shevchenko" [боротьба за Шевченка] (Zabuzhko 2007 [1997, 2001]: 6).

Born in a peasant family, Shevchenko lived at a time when Ukrainian peasants suffered in the meager conditions of serfdom. In the 19th century, the territory of contemporary Ukraine was divided between two political powers. Western Ukraine belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire while Eastern Ukraine, where Shevchenko was born, was part of the Russian Empire.⁷ Although the abolition of serfdom in the western part of Ukraine took place in 1848, in eastern Ukraine the emancipation of serfs did not happen until 1861.

As a result of to his extraordinary talents in writing and drawing, Shevchenko obtained a higher education at the Saint-Petersburg Academy of Arts and his freedom was purchased with the help of his influential friends. However, he did not live to see the general abolition of serfdom in his part of Ukraine. He died prematurely, after many years of persecution by the political authorities of

the Russian Empire, shortly before abolition was decreed. Shevchenko was viewed by the Russian imperial regime as a politically dangerous figure due to the content of his writings.

Humanist ideas are recurrent themes in both Shevchenko's poetry and prose. In particular, he devotes a great amount of attention to the suffering of Ukrainian peasants under the conditions of serfdom, strongly criticizing both the ruling regime and the clergy, who had great political and economic power at the time. Shevchenko's most famous publication is the compilation of poems entitled *Kobzar* that first appeared in print in 1840 in Saint Petersburg. Numerous editions of *Kobzar* and translations into many languages have been published since that time.

Shevchenko is read and interpreted in different ways by various groups of people, who each adapt his texts to their own ideological views and needs. Interpreting his works in terms of Marxist theory, the Soviets considered Shevchenko a great revolutionary who spoke for oppressed peasants in class-based Imperial Russia. Many Ukrainian nationalists, in turn, view Shevchenko as a hero who struggled against the political oppression of Ukraine by Russia. In their interpretation of his works, nationalists draw parallels between Imperial and Soviet Russia. While Soviet ideologists with secularist views tried actively to de-Christianize Shevchenko, Ukrainian nationalists attempt the opposite. They tend to Christianize his legacy. Among countless examples are such popular slogans as ["*Kobzar* is the Bible of Our people" [Кобзар' – Біблія нашого народу] and

poetry like that of Dmytro Pavlychko's "Our Father, Taras the Almighty" [Отче наш, Тарасе всемогутий...] (Zabuzhko 2007 [1997, 2001]: 6).⁸

Although some aspects of the nationalist interpretation, especially the anti-colonial ideas, are shared by Ukrainian Pagans, unlike Christian nationalists, they consider Shevchenko anti-Christian and even pro-Pagan. They reach this conclusion via a selective approach to his poetry. Pagans choose particular excerpts from his poems and interpret them separately from the complete texts. For example, a banner carried by the Native Faith adherents in the procession discussed above included the following lines from Shevchenko's poem "Dream" [Сон]:

...For alas, O Christ,
What trouble have you caused! And how transformed
The very spirit of God's human creatures!
Our Cossack heads have fallen in the dust,
Our foolish heads for 'Justice' and 'The Faith';
And we have drunk our own and strangers' blood...
And are we any better for it? No!
We have become still worse!... (Shevchenko 1964: 323)

Upon reading this entire poem, the reader is given the impression that Shevchenko criticizes the political and clerical regimes of his time, underlining their roles in society. He seems to be more concerned with people being bad Christians rather than Christianity being a bad religion. However, it is exactly the latter message that Ukrainian Pagans focus on, separating it from its broader context. Presenting these particular lines of Shevchenko's poetry in the context of the *khoda* ritual, Pagans emphasize Shevchenko's alleged "pro-Pagan" views and,

thus, symbolically appropriate this historical figure as their hero and prophet. (Interestingly, Pagans' attempts to de-Christianize Shevchenko mirror those of the Pagans' other ideological enemies, the Soviets).

While Kertzer stresses the function and significance of individuals as symbols in the consolidation of a community, Anthony Smith focuses on the "content" of such symbols. He points out that within nationalist movements, famous figures are often consecrated and acquire the status of "heroes/messiahs" of nations, and thus play an important role in the formation of what Smith calls a "sacred communion of the people" – their nation (Smith 2003: 32):

These heroes and messiahs are[...] seen as 'authentic' – pure, true, pristine, originary – and as such rooted in the soil of the homeland. Their message is still relevant, they provide models of conduct, and their exploits are true *exempla virtutis*, worthy of emulation in each generation. (Smith 2003: 41)

The themes of resistance to the political oppression of Ukraine and the perceived pro-Pagan sentiments in Shevchenko's writings are relevant messages for Ukrainian Pagans. According to Pagans, Shevchenko's prophetic gift is evidenced in his ability to recognize early on that the problems of his fellow Ukrainians are rooted in their "foreign" spirituality.

Consecrating Ancestral Land

Ukrainian Pagans consecrate particular pieces of land that can be placed into the following categories: historic sites, natural landscapes, places of sacred revelation, areas mentioned in folk narratives, and the entire territory of Ukraine. Although it

is difficult to calculate the exact number of consecrated places, there are several dozens of those across Ukraine.

a) Historic Sites

Historic sites consecrated by Ukrainian Pagans are those geographic areas mentioned in historic chronicles or other documents dealing with the history of Ukraine. For example, as part of her speech delivered near the monument to Shevchenko on Ukrainian Independence Day in 2006, Volkvynia Zoreslava read her letter to the President of Ukraine written on behalf of all the followers of Native Faith. This letter expressed several concerns of Native Faith adherents. One of their major appeals to the Ukrainian government was, “to provide financial support for the building of a Native Gods Temple in one of the holy places in the Kyiv area that historically belonged to pagans.” Zoreslava suggested those areas that are mentioned in primary sources dealing with the establishment of the city of Kyiv:

For example, it can be the Zamkova (Castle) hill, Starokyivs’ka (Old Kyiv) hill, the sources of the Lybid’ river or any other piece of land within the territory of Kyiv, which has been the capital of Rus’ since primordial times.

Starokyivs’ka Hill (mentioned by Zoreslava), the territory surrounding the present-day National Museum of the History of Ukraine on Volodymyrs’ka Street in Kyiv, is especially highly regarded by modern Pagans. According to historians, a pagan shrine was located in this area before the time of Volodymyr. During Volodymyr’s era, a statue of Perun was situated exactly in the area now occupied by the Museum.⁹

While the majority of Ukrainians view this area as a historic part of the city, for Ukrainian Pagans, the site means much more. Although it is impossible for them to reclaim ownership of this exact site, Pagans consecrate the area around the museum as a sacred place of their ancestors. On August 26, 2009, Ukrainian Television News Service TSN reported the following:

A three-meter-long idol of God Perun was placed today in the center of Kyiv on the Starokyivs'ka hill, on the spot from where it was pulled down and thrown into the Dnipro river in 988. The representatives of Native Faith, Ancestral Fire and RUNVira carried Perun in their arms as they marched along the hills of Kyiv. (TSN 2009)¹⁰

This event united the three Pagan groups whose relationships are otherwise hostile. Even RUNVira adherents participated in this initiative, despite the fact that they do not follow the polytheistic beliefs of their ancestors and do not worship Perun. Regardless of their spiritual and ideological differences, Pagans sometimes mobilize forces in order to gain recognition in the wider society, where they are generally marginalized.

Intriguingly, the Starokyivs'ka Hill is the place where the Church of the Tithes (Desiatynna Tserkva), the first Christian stone church of Kyivan Rus', was built in 988-996 by Prince Volodymyr. Since that time, the Church of the Tithes has been ruined and rebuilt several times. The last replica was destroyed by the Soviets in 1928. In 2005, the President of Ukraine Viktor Yushchenko assigned the reconstruction of the church to Kyiv City government, agreeing to allot funds from the national state budget for this project.

There are many different opinions in Ukrainian society on whether or not the Church of the Tithes should be rebuilt. Some intellectuals argue against any

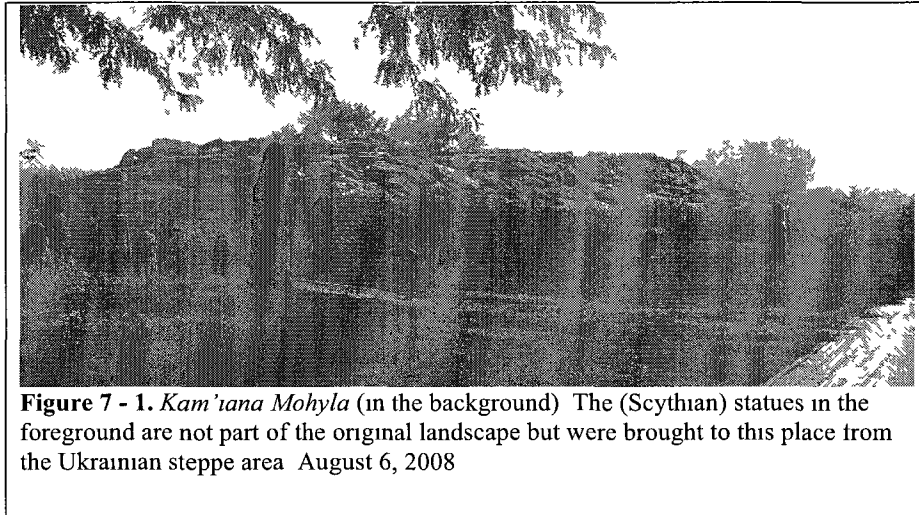
replicas and would prefer “original” ruins as the true remains of their ancestral heritage. Others, especially those who associate the post-Soviet revival of national consciousness with the religious (Christian) revival, fully support this initiative. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church is especially enthusiastic about this project. These believers have built a small chapel near the place allotted for the actual church, where they conduct their Sunday Liturgies and other services.

The chapel is situated only a few meters away from the Pagan shrine where Native Faith followers conduct their own Sunday rituals. There is a great tension between these two ideologically opposite forces as each group struggles for its right to this sacred territory. For Christians, this place is holy because the original Church of the Tithes witnessed their ancestors’ first steps towards Christianization. For Ukrainian Pagans, this territory is sacred for exactly the opposite reasons; it is associated with the pre-Christian times and practices. In this situation, we have contested narratives about the past as related to a particular territory.

b) Natural Landscapes

Ukrainian Pagans also consecrate certain landscapes. Among numerous examples is *Kam'iana Mohyla* [Stone Tomb] in the Zaporizhzhia region of eastern Ukraine. At the state level, *Kam'iana Mohyla* is a State Historical and Archeological Preserve/Park [Державний історико-археологічний заповідник] (Fig. 3-1). The official state discourse about the significance of this place is shaped by official historical sources. Borys Mykhailov, one of the most well-known researchers of *Kam'iana Mohyla*, views it as a phenomenon of nature. He

reaches this conclusion by tracing multiple changes in the land surface in this area (see Mykhailov 2005: 6).



Mykhailov points out that the caves and grottoes of *Kam'iana Mohyla* attracted people and served as a place of spiritual practices in the distant past. He attempts to decode some petroglyphs in its grottos and on the stone blocks (Mykhailov 2005). To Ukrainian Pagans, *Kam'iana Mohyla* means much more than a historic site that reflects the spirituality of the past, and their narratives about this place differ markedly from those of Mykhailov.

I accompanied a group of RUNVira followers from L'viv on their trip to the site on August 6, 2008. Iara, a RUNVira adherent from Melitopol', conducted a tour for her fellow believers from western Ukraine. She was familiar with the historical sources devoted to *Kam'iana Mohyla*, especially Mykhailov's works. According to Iara, Mykhailov's problem is that he is not willing to accept that *Kam'iana Mohyla* is a living spiritual organism of the present that "produces" sacred energy and reveals esoteric "information." In contrast to historians, many

Pagans believe that it was a higher spiritual force, not gradual changes in Earth's lithosphere that created *Kam'iana Mohyla*.

As soon as we approached the site, Iara instructed her guests in the way to address the spirit of *Kam'iana Mohyla*, asking him to accept them. Then she began to share stories from her personal experiences. Her discovery of *Kam'iana Mohyla* began several years ago when, with a group of like-minded friends, she walked through the site trying to experience its energy. Among their special findings was a triangle-shaped rock. When they first approached the rock they felt an especially strong flow of energy coming from it. Then they found that this rock could “talk,” “answering” people's questions. Among many miraculous encounters, Iara mentioned that several years ago, after having prayed on *Kam'iana Mohyla*, her friend was cured of an advanced form of cancer, without any medical intervention.

Interestingly, there is usually no room for the supernatural in official RUNVira discourse. RUNVira followers treat *Kam'iana Mohyla* as their sacred site because it was witness to the spiritual lives of ancient civilizations. They do not emphasize the present-day magical potential of the place. This view is more closely connected to that of Ukrainian historians rather than to that of magic-oriented Ukrainian Pagans. In fact, Mykhailov is widely quoted in RUNVira publications about the site.¹¹ Iara, a RUNVira adherent, is rather an exception. During her tour, she mentioned that she felt a close spiritual connection with Ancestral Fire followers because they understand and highly value spiritual energy.

However, despite their pro-scientific orientation, the majority of Iara's RUNVira guests were impressed with her. Through her narratives about the supernatural, in their eyes Iara acquired special power. While conducting their Holy Hour of Self-Reflection on *Kam'iana Mohyla*, the group could not reach the culmination for a long time because Iara kept saying "something is not letting me go" [щось мене ще не відпускає]. Led by Iara, the RUNVira followers had to relocate several times until she could feel the right energy that would let her go. Interestingly, Iara did not produce any miracles that could prove her supernatural power and special connection with the site. It was her narrative alone that made a powerful impression. Her guests continuously contrasted themselves with Iara, emphasizing their diminished (spiritual) position and the need to learn from her.

Pagan magical thinking is not accepted by mainstream society and official scholarship. Thus, Iara is viewed as an "enemy" by the administration of the *Kam'iana Mohyla* State Historical and Archeological Preserve. There is a poster on the ticket booth at the entrance to the Preserve that states, in Russian: "Attention! **Only** academic staff is authorized to conduct tours on the site of *Kam'iana Mohyla*. [emphasis in the original]" [Внимание! Экскурсии по территории заповедника Каменная Могила проводятся **только** научными сотрудниками]. Iara conducts her tours for Pagans illegally.

c) Places of Sacred Revelation

Places associated with particular spiritual revelations have also become consecrated by Ukrainian Pagans. One of these places is the mountain Gregit in

western Ukraine, where Shaian's spiritual revelation took place and where he wished to be buried. Halyna Lozko comments on Shaian's special attachment to Gregit:

It was precisely on Gregit that Shaian visited a common Hutsul family's household and observed the ritual of the blessing of the seeds before sowing. He saw that this ritual was not Christian but had just a few Christian elements added on. Although the ritual appeared to be conducted for the glory of Jesus Christ, it was indeed devoted to the mother-earth and sun that were sanctified by our Ancestors. Within the ritual, the seeds were imparted with the strength of strong muscular men in order to fertilize mother-earth. This symbolism was very clear. A woman would put these seeds into her apron. She symbolized mother earth while men represented the forefather in Heaven, namely, our [God] Svaroh. Undoubtedly, all this symbolism deeply touched young Shaian and became the primary reason for him to take the first step towards the revival of Native Faith, not just as some kind of an academic work in the form of a book. He began to revive Native Faith as a living and active religion.¹²

d) Places from Folk Narratives

Among the places that are highly valued by Ukrainian Pagans, are those sites whose significance is communicated in oral narratives. For example, in spring 2007, on our way to the L'viv *Znesinnia* Park, where their Sunday rituals were taking place at that time, a young male follower of Ancestral Fire pointed to an area surrounded by a fence. He said that this place is called *Svitovydove pole* [Svitovyd's field], and it is where their ancestors had a shrine in the past. Although there are no supporting historical records, this information was passed on among present-day Pagans by word of mouth. My interviewee shared his concern regarding the government's recent decision to build a tunnel under this piece of land. This decision is part of the plan developed for the preparation to the

final games of the 2012 European Soccer Championship. Ukrainian Pagans strongly resist this initiative, considering such actions in regards to their sacred land unacceptable. Although Pagans do not have any political power, they are determined to struggle on the spiritual level, through prayers to the Native Gods.

I later found more information about the *Svitovydove pole*. It turns out that it was Zhrytsia Iaryna, the leader of the L'viv-based Native Faith group, who first discovered the place. Her source of information was a small book entitled *Til'ky u L'vovi* [Only in L'viv] published in 2007. *Til'ky u L'vovi* is a collection of popular essays. The contributors emphasize the popular (not academic) nature of this publication. In a humorous way, they identify it as “coffee talk” [розмова за кавою] or “conversations in the coffee houses of L'viv” [бесіди балакунів львівських кав'ярень]. The collection consists of urban legends about L'viv, whether or not they are based on historic evidence. The underground river that flows across the city, Dracula's autograph in L'viv, and old pagan shrines are among these stories.

The article “Walking to Pagan L'viv” [*Пішки до поганського Львова*] includes the following information about the *Svitovydove pole*:

The toponym *Svitovydove pole* was first noted by the historian Antonii Shnaider on the basis of local folk stories. Now, it is unknown whether it is a more than one thousand year old history that preserved this authentic term, and we are indeed dealing with a shrine of Sviatovyd in L'viv, or whether it is a later romantic invention. Nevertheless, the main idea remains the same. The so called *Svitovydove pole* is a pre-Christian Slavic shrine from the VII-IX centuries that is beautifully preserved, practically not researched, and miraculously survived at the heart of modern civilization. (Kosmolins'ka 2007)¹³

As we can see, this passage is somewhat unclear. At first, the author points out that the information about this place is indeed very obscure and then firmly states that we are dealing with an old shrine. This ambiguity does not seem to be important for Zhrytsia Iaryna. She recalls how her daughter accidentally found this book and brought it home. The information about pagan shrines provided in it became especially valuable to their family because it presented the spiritual core they had been searching for. Guests from the much older city of Kyiv could no longer diminish the spiritual role of L'viv by saying that in the 13th century, when L'viv was established, pagans had ceased exist. To Iaryna, her finding signifies that L'viv was not built “on an empty place” (Iaryna, n. d.). This example demonstrates that a spiritual need for this kind of information can overcome the necessity to verify it against historical data.

Zhrytsia Iaryna told me that after she found this particular place for their sacred services, she posted a note about it on the Internet. Shortly after, the followers of Ancestral Fire began to worship at the same place. Although this group of people has since separated from Ancestral Fire and Volodymyr Kurovs'kyi, Ancestral Fire's official website still includes photographs of the *Svitovydove pole* under the heading “photos of the ancient shrine in L'viv”¹⁴ All these encounters show how the *Svitovydove pole* has made the transition from the “conversations in the coffee houses of Lviv” to a present-day Pagan sacred site.

e) Ukraine as a Sacred Territory

In addition to separate pieces of land, Pagans view the entire territory of Ukraine as holy. These sentiments are expressed in Zoreslava's letter to the Ukrainian government where she strongly criticizes its recent decision regarding the sale of land in Ukraine. In the early years of the Soviet Union the lands of the Ukrainian peasantry were confiscated and converted into collective farms. After the collapse of the Soviet regime, the issue of de-collectivization became one of the major focuses of the Ukrainian government. The government faced the dilemma of determining the future of this de-collectivized land. One option was to sell it to private individuals and businesses, including foreign interests. This decision immediately resulted in protests from the Pagans, for whom the sale of the sacred land of their Ancestors was unacceptable. Zoreslava formulated her concerns regarding this issue in the following way:

Many times the adherents of the Native Faith in Ukraine have appealed to state officials regarding the unacceptability of selling land in Ukraine, warning them about possible negative outcomes of such a poorly considered decision. It was impossible to take this land away from the people with the aid of weapons for so many thousand years, yet now they attempt to take it away with the help of small pieces of paper – money! We are certain that the Ukrainian people will protect their land till their last breath! Our history manifests this [attitude]... Let us not allow our land to turn into a commodity!¹⁵

Contested Sacred Territories

The above examples illustrate how Ukrainian Pagans claim particular pieces of land or the entire territory of Ukraine as holy. Pagans legitimize their views by referring to the “primordial” past of these territories. In other words, to

them, “old” means “holy.” Anthony Smith’s concept of “sacred territories” in the context of nationalist movements helps us to understand the Ukrainian Pagan views connected with the ideas of land and nation. According to Smith, “sacred territories” are those areas that at one time in the history of an ethnic community “provided the scene for historic events” (Smith 1996: 589). This concept resonates with that of “holy lands” as discussed by Adrian Hastings (2003). A “holy land” is usually associated with a contact or belief in a contact with the sacred that took place at some point in that territory’s history (Hastings 2003). In Ukrainian Paganism, as a nationalist but specifically religious movement, the geographic areas that are believed to have witnessed pre-Christian sacred practices become consecrated.

In their relationship to “sacred territories,” Ukrainian Pagans are similar to their Western European counterparts, especially those of the British heritage, who:

[...] have deployed ‘sacred site’ as preferred nomenclature for ‘archeological site’ or ‘monument’ or ‘remains’: ‘sacred’ lends a reverential and spiritual element to what is otherwise perceived as only an academic resource, a dead past, or a destination on a tourist checklist. (Blain and Wallis 2007: 28)

As illustrated above, the Pagan discourse about sacred territories often conflicts with other discourses regarding the same places. For example, three contrasting narratives – academic (historical), Christian and Pagan – intersect in each group’s claim to the *Starokyivs’ka Hill*. In the case of *Kam’iana Mohyla*, academic narrative about this landscape comes into conflict with Pagan views,

while in the case of *Svitovydove pole* shows a conflict between Pagans and the government of Ukraine.

Although historically and contextually unique, the struggles of Ukrainian Pagans for their sacred places resonate with those documented by scholars in others parts of the world. Researchers refer to these places as “contested landscapes” (cf. Ivakhiv 2001) or “contested sites” (cf. Blain and Wallis 2007). Jenny Blain and Robert Wallis, while focusing on the Western Pagans of British heritage, point out the way they compete for ownership of sacred sites with various archeological and socio-political institutions (Blain and Wallis 2007). In Glastonbury, England, and Sedona, Arizona, USA, Adrian Ivakhiv documented how Pagans struggle to claim these landscapes through the construction of particular narratives and symbols (Ivakhiv 2001).

It is not narratives alone that nourish the discourse of “sacred territories” in Ukrainian Paganism. Narratives form the foundation for Pagan rituals. Visiting these sites, establishing shrines on their territories and conducting sacred services, all contribute to the creation of profound experiences with the places. Through these experiences, Pagans engage into a symbolic conversation with their ancestors and the distant past, simultaneously legitimizing the validity of their present-day spirituality.

National vs. Transnational Culture

Ukrainian Pagans, while adapting rural (peasant) folklore to their needs, create a new “national” culture. Importantly, many 19th – early 20th century peasants were not politically conscious and did not identify themselves in national

terms. In contrast to the peasants whose culture they strive to revive, contemporary Ukrainian Pagans have access to information about all ethnographic regions of Ukraine through both published sources, and the ability to travel and conduct their own research. As a result, Pagans incorporate elements from various regions of Ukraine. What was ethnographically specific to a particular region in the past acquires a political connotation and becomes part of the “generic” present-day national culture. Pagans perceive ethnographic diversity with pride, understanding it as a sign of cultural richness. However, ethnographic diversity may weaken the representational characteristics of a Pagan community by causing “chaos.” To create national distinctiveness, Ukrainian Pagans use only selected elements from these diverse traditions to serve as “logos,” to borrow Andriy Nahachewsky’s concept (2003: 37).¹⁶

The followers of Ancestral Fire take one step further. Pan-Slavic in their orientation and striving to build a Slavic spiritual state, they de-emphasize national differences, promoting instead those cultural features that unite all Slavic Pagans. Ancestral Fire’s spiritual practices are based on selected elements from various Slavic traditions. In this way, Ancestral Fire followers create a new transnational entity that they call Slavic *Rid* (Ukr) or *Rod* (Rus) meaning Slavic Clan or Family. (Contrary to popular beliefs, there is no historical evidence suggesting that the old Slavs perceived themselves as a unified ethno-cultural entity (cf. Ivakhiv 2005c: 209-211)).

The Kupalo Wreath [Купальський вінок] festival in Kyiv in 2008 provided many examples of the Slavic cultural mosaic. In the evening preceding

the Kupalo night, while the *Volkhvy* were preparing for their sacred ceremony, other participants were actively engaged in *khorovody* (group dances accompanied by singing) and various ritual games. Pagan leaders from Ukraine and other countries came to the festival well prepared and took turns in introducing their ethnically specific activities to all participants.

While playing games and dancing, the participants did not put much emphasis on ethnic particularities but stressed the Slavic nature of their ritualistic activities. For example, after they finished performing a Russian *khorovod* which involved some intense physical exercises such as running towards the centre of the circle and back to its edge, many participants were out of breath. The Russian leader of the *khorovod* commented: “Now we can all feel what the **clan khorovod** is” [ВОТ МЫ ВСЕ И ПОЧУВСТВОВАЛИ, ЧТО ТАКОЕ **родовой хоровод**” (emphasis – ML)].

¹ An earlier version of this chapter is published as an article entitled “‘Слава Дажбогу!’ Український рідновірвський рух як альтернативна візія нації” [‘Glory to Dazhboh’ The Ukrainian Pagan Movement as an Alternative Vision of Nation] (See Lesiv 2010)

² This line refers to traditional beliefs in the house spirit, *domovyk*. It is believed that the *domovyk* guards and protects the households. However, masters have to treat them with great respect in order to maintain a good relationship with their *domovyk*. One of the ways to keep this spirit pleased is to leave food for him at night, considering that he likes milk and sweets but hates salt. The *domovyk* often pays nocturnal visits to his masters and can forewarn them about upcoming difficulties or troubles. When a *domovyk* begins to suffocate a person at night, the victim is supposed to ask “Is it (the nocturnal visit) for good or bad?” The answer that he or she hears back is related to the upcoming future events, whether positive or negative. For a detailed ethnographic description of beliefs in the *domovyk* and particular stories collected with experiences with *domovyky* in contemporary Ukrainian villages, see Britsyna and Golovakha 2004.

³ Some academics divide the old Slavic belief system in two categories “higher” and “lower” spiritual beings. Gods and Goddesses who are in charge of natural forces and particular spheres of life represent higher spiritual beings, while lower spiritual beings represent demonology. Lower spirits such as *domovyk* are in charge of small areas and territories. The differences between various lower spirits that existed in the pre-Christian beliefs became obscured over time. With the establishment of Christianity, they became identified by the generic term *nechyst’* or *nechysta syla* or (unclean force) (Hnatiuk 1912: vii). Many Ukrainian Pagans, including Zhyvosyl, refuse to draw a line between higher and lower spirits. To Pagans, they all represent rich cultural imagination of their ancestors.

⁴ А ми свого не віддали, старих Богів Своїх не знищили,
Ми їм хатину відвели, як прадідам у домі віщім.
В світлиці в нас іконостас, і ми вклоняємося щиро,
Тому, хто захищає нас, хто нам дає надію й віру.
Та як би в світі не було, які б століття не минали,
Ми дослухалися й чекали, коли нам скажуть: “На добро!” оті, кого ми врятували.
І хитрий наш менталітет молився вголос і підмолювавсь
Ярилу за розквітлий степ і Велесу за житній колос.
Сварогу за вогонь в душі, за обереги Берегиням,
Не ідолам - природі жить дозволили в своїй родині.
Русалки і лісовики - ми навіть нечисть не спалили
Отак живуть домовики в хатах, які ми освятили.
Ну де є ще такий народ, пов’язаний з живим і вічним,
Що як безсмертний й мудрий волхв з’єднав себе з земним й космічним?
Ні, ми свого не віддали, лише коріння прикопали,
В усі часи воно давало нам силу супроти біди.
Ми не порушили свій Рід. За те і нас наш Бог зберіг.

⁵ I will return to this particular song in Chapter VII where I will address the concept of nature as communicated in its lyrics, and will address major folkloric images employed in the song.

⁶ The Ancestral Fire ritual of name-giving and, specifically, the role of the spiritual leader in it, is addressed in greater detail in Chapter VIII (Syncretism).

⁷ For a detailed discussion of the history of Ukraine of this period see Subtelny 1988: 201-335.

⁸ Oksana Zabuzhko provides a detailed philosophical analysis of various ideological readings of Shevchenko’s works, placing these readings in their historical contexts. See Zabuzhko 2007 [1997, 2001]. George Grabowicz also touches upon these problems. See Grabowicz 1982 and 2000.

⁹ Maryna Strel’nyk, The National Museum of the History of Ukraine, featured on TSN 2009.

¹⁰ Триметровий кумир Бога Перуна сьогодні встановили в центрі столиці на Старокиївській горі, власне, там, звідки його у 988 стягнули та скинули в Дніпро. Язичники, Православні рідновіри та Рунвісти на руках винесли Перуна на Київській кручі.

¹¹ See, for example, Dovhych 2004 (11003).

¹² Саме на Греготі, коли Шаян був в колибі простих гуцулів і там побачив обряд освячення зерна перед посівом. Він бачив, що цей обряд не християнський, християнська тільки невеличка надбудова, що це робиться во славу Ісуса Христа. Але сам обряд присвячений рідній матінці-землі, рідному сонцю, яке обожествлялося нашими Пращурами. І те, що це зерно наснажувалося силою міцних, мужніх чоловіків для того, щоб запліднювати матінку-землю. І символіка була надзвичайно прозора. Жінка брала це зерно в свій фартух. Вона символізувала матінку-землю. А оці гуцули, вони символізували прабатька Небо, тобто Сварога нашого. І, безумовно, вся ця символіка, вона глибоко сколихнула душу молодого тоді ще Шаяна і стала причиною-першопштовхом того, що Володимир Шаян поклав початок відродженню Рідної Віри не просто як якоїсь там наукової праці у вигляді книжки, але він започаткував відродження Рідної Віри саме як живої і дієвої релігії.

¹³ Топонім “Святовидове поле” за місцевими переказами занотував у XIX столітті відомий львівський історик Антоній Шнайдер. Наразі невідомо, чи то дійсно історія більше тисячі років зберегла цю автентичку, і маємо тут, у Львові, справу з капищем самого Святовида, чи то вже пізніша романтична вигадка, але суть від того не змінюється. Так зване Святовидове поле – прекрасно збережене, практично недосліджене дохристиянське слов’янське капище VII–IX століть, якимсь дивом вціліло фактично під носом у сучасної цивілізації.

¹⁴ <http://alatyr.org.ua/photo/lvivkap/p.htm>, last accessed December 14, 2010.

¹⁵ Рідновіри України неодноразово зверталися до вищих посадовців держави з приводу неприпустимості продажу землі в Україні, можливих далекосяжних негативних наслідків такого непродуманого рішення. Землю, яку стільки тисячоліть не зуміли забрати в народу зброєю, зараз прагнуть відібрати за допомогою папірців – грошей. Ми впевнені, що захищати свою рідну землю український народ буде останнього подиху, про що свідчить

наша історія і про що неодноразово наголошується у Велесовій Книзі. Не допустимо того, що земля стала товаром.

¹⁶ This situation partly relates to that in the Ukrainian North American diaspora. For example, those who are familiar with a great variety in embroidery (in terms of techniques and colors) from various regions of Ukraine would be surprised that often only black and red cross-stitch embroidery from the Poltava region is recognized as “traditional” Ukrainian. For a detailed discussion of this situation in Ukrainian Canadian embroidery see R. Klymasz’s “Crucial Trends in Modern Ukrainian Embroidery” (1987). A. Nahachewsky explains the same phenomenon in Ukrainian Canadian stage dance from the perspective of “the builders of the national dance tradition” whose “object...is not to ‘save’ the entire corpus of traditional dances that are performed by Ukrainians, but rather to promote a selected few of them to serve as symbols of the rest. In this respect, national dances can be seen as functioning something like commercial logos” (2003: 37). For a sociological discussion of selectiveness of Ukrainian cultural symbols in Canada, see Isajiw 1984: 120-22.

CHAPTER VIII

“We Allowed Nature to Live in Our Holy Place...”:

The Concepts of Nature and Power in Ukrainian Paganism

Nature: Western Pagan Views

Because of their focus on nature, various Western Pagan groups are often defined as “Nature Religions.”¹ Although the concept of nature is culturally constructed, and “[n]ature’ means different things to different people” (Ivakhiv 2005b: 196),² such notions as environmentalism, territory, ethnicity, race and power, when viewed in their relationship to nature, are shared by many Western Pagans.

a) Nature and Environmentalism

Western, especially North American, Paganism is closely tied to the general environmental movement. For example, it was in America where Wicca, originally associated with English ancestral ethnic heritage and often viewed as the “mystery religion” and “metaphoric fertility religion,” became identified as a “nature” or “earth religion” in line with the developing environmental movement (Clifton 2006: 52-3). What was originally perceived as the connection with pre-Christian European spiritual beings and practiced as spell craft, is now a religious response to environmental consciousness in the large American socio-cultural context (Clifton 2006:66).³

Similar to Clifton, Regina Smith Oboler emphasizes the continuous connection between Paganism and environmental ethics pursued by a larger cultural system. She conducts quantitative research comparing responses to questions about the environment collected both by Gallop Poll and directly from Pagans. Her research shows that for the majority of respondents their engagement in ecological matters preceded their involvement in Paganism. As Oboler puts it, “[p]agan paths attract people whose pre-existing moods and motivations already match the Pagan ethos” rather than “generate pro-environmentalist moods and motivations in adherents” (Oboler 2004:98).

While interpreting this phenomenon, Oboler draws upon Clifford Geertz’s concept of “thick description.” Geertz stresses a deep interrelationship between religious and mundane settings and, consequently, between values and symbols incorporated in religious life and those that communicate ethical standards in secular environments. While generally agreeing with Geertz’s view, Oboler finds a problem with his implication that the “direction of causality is only from religion to other aspects of life” (Oboler 2004:104). She argues that relationships between the sacred and the mundane are more complex, concluding that:

“[i]t is not so much that religion is the cultural system that dictates the terms of social action, as that religious action and more mundane social action are parts of a larger cultural system that encompasses both, in which each reflects the other as a mirror image” (Oboler 2004: 105).

Western Pagans often view themselves as separate from nature. They can bring about social and cultural change and, unlike nature, their rights are recognized and valued (Ivakhiv 2005b: 218). However, the change brought about

by humans does not always have a positive effect on nature. In line with general environmentalist ideas, the majority of Western Pagans raise ecological awareness through their criticism of the modern world's use of nature as a resource for industrial growth, which they feel is leading to its destruction.⁴

b) Nature in Relationship to Territory, Ethnicity and Race

...I am a Pagan. I am a part of the whole of nature. The rocks, the animals, the plants, the elements are my relatives. Other humans are my sisters and brothers, whatever their races, colours, ages, nationalities, creeds or sexual preferences [here and elsewhere – emphasis by ML]. The earth is my mother and the sky is my father. The sun and moon are my grandparents, and the stars my ancestors. I am part of this large family of nature, not the master of it. I have my own special part to play and I seek to play that part to the best of my ability. I seek to live in harmony with others in the family of nature, treating others with respect, not abuse. (Fox 2006: 25)

These are the words of Selena Fox, a well-known American Pagan practitioner. Although it voices some individual characteristics, her speech represents the ways relationships between humans and nature are understood by many contemporary Western Pagans. As this quote illustrates, Western Pagans perceive both nature and humans in global terms, de-emphasizing any geographical, ethnic, political, sexual and racial boundaries.

c) Nature and Power

Many Western Pagans emphasize equality in their relationship with nature. Fox's phrase "I am a part of this family of nature, not the master of it"

suggests that humans are viewed as equal “partners” with nature rather than the “overlords” of their surrounding environment.

While recognizing that nature sometimes physically overpowers humans, and can be unmerciful and manifest its brutality through such disasters as tsunamis, hurricanes, and earthquakes, Pagans try to “craft a sustainable relationship” with all of nature’s behavioral patterns, as pointed out by another Pagan, Emma Restall Orr. While Restall Orr does not encourage her fellow humans to fully submit to nature’s power, considering submission to be self-negation, she does stress the necessity of peaceful “negotiation” between humans and nature. “Crafting a relationship” with nature should be clearly differentiated from attempts of humans to obtain control over nature by abusing its resources. Restall Orr strongly criticizes such attempts, arguing that they are often futile (2007: 37-38).

Ukrainian Pagans: Perception of Nature

a) Nature and Environmentalism

Environmental concerns are not as prominent in Ukrainian Paganism as they are in its Western counterpart. This mirrors the relative indifference of the larger Ukrainian society to ecological issues. While environmentalist ideas are firmly established in Western countries, they are less developed in Eastern Europe, including Ukraine. Attempts to educate the general population about basic environmental issues such as recycling and separate waste collection systems have begun only recently. Their implementation by the socio-economic

infrastructure is progressing very slowly, while ecological organizations are still largely marginalized.

One of the most popular emerging environmentalist trends that has influenced some Pagans in present-day Ukraine is the *Anastasiia Movement* [Анастасійвський рух]. This movement has its origins in Russia and its roots are associated with a series of books entitled *The Ringing Cedars of Russia* [Звенящие кедры России] by Vladimir Megre. According to the plot, during the 1990s, a Russian entrepreneur named Megre traveled to a Siberian forest for business purposes. During this trip he met Anastasia, a descendant of an ancient Siberian tribe. Anastasia is a fictional female character, but some people believe in her actual existence. In addition to possessing the healthiest and the most physically perfect human characteristics, this woman also has supernatural powers. She knows every detail about civilization, yet promotes a natural way of life. After their meeting, Anastasia authorized Megre to write a series of books in order to pass her message along to the larger society. Megre's books present Anastasia's teachings about health, nutrition, spirituality, the upbringing of children, sexuality, and, in general, focus on the building of a harmonious relationship with nature (see Megre 2002).

One of the major ideas promoted by Anastasia is that of *family homesteads* [родовые поместья] incorporated into rural settlements. She encourages every family to acquire one hectare (2.471 acres) of land. On this land, the family is supposed to build a house from natural materials, dig a well, plant an orchard and

garden, and operate subsistence farming. In her opinion, only this life style can save the environment and achieve the healthiest state of life.

Megre's books have touched many. Reportedly, they sell in the millions in Russian and have also been translated into approximately 20 other languages. There are many followers and registered organizations working toward the fulfillment of what they often refer to as "Anastasia's dream" in Russia and Ukraine. For example, on the website of the L'viv Anastasia Information Centre, the idea of family-owned homesteads and settlements in the L'viv region is promoted. Reportedly, Anastasia followers have four homesteads already operating in the area.⁵

Recently, some Ukrainian Pagans, especially the representatives of Ancestral Fire, have begun to adapt Megre's ideas to their own needs and ideology. On their internet forum "Creation of a Pagan settlement" [*Створення рідновірівського поселення*], activists of Ancestral Fire discuss Anastasia's model of settlement. Sviatoslav, who is familiar with the Anastasia movement, offers the following suggestions to his fellow Ancestral Fire followers. According to him, sociologists argue that an optimum settlement would include 150-200 families (this constitutes about 800-1000 people). In such a settlement, Pagans would need their own Temple with 3-5 spiritual leaders. A school with Pagan teachers should be the first priority. In addition, such a settlement is expected to have its own government structure such as a village council as well as a post office and a medical clinic. It would also need 15-20 entrepreneurs who would be able to establish community businesses.⁶

First steps towards the establishment of such a Pagan settlement have already been made. Bozhena, the sister of Volodymyr Kurovs'kyi, and her husband Volkhv Tverdoslav, along with their three young children, recently abandoned their city lifestyle and settled in the village of Rashtivtsi in the Ternopil' region. They are expecting six more Ancestral Fire families to soon join them. Together, they plan to create a health and educational centre in this village (TSN 2010).

In contrast to Western Paganism, whose representatives often join this religion on the basis on their pre-existing environmental concerns, it is often through Paganism that some Ukrainians begin to think more deeply about ecological issues, responding to environmentalist ideas that appear in the larger society.

b) Nature and Cities

While many Western Pagans criticize urban centres for initiating the technological progress that has had a detrimental effect on the natural environment, Ukrainian Pagans are concerned that “cities ruin ethnic culture” [міста руйнують етнічну культуру].⁷ This difference in these two views of urban settings reflects a major difference between the two movements - Western Paganism as a “Nature Religion” and Ukrainian Paganism as an “Identity Building Religion.” However, in both cases, the negative sentiments regarding cities remain purely theoretical. The majority of both Western and Ukrainian Pagans are city dwellers. It is usually only while participating in rituals, held

outdoors in parks, forests and at perceived historical sacred sites, that Ukrainian Pagans commune with “pristine” nature.

As national identity builders, Ukrainian Pagans feel comfortable in cities. In the search for their roots, they are often drawn not only to the rural folklore associated with pristine nature but also to the glorious (or glorified) pages of Ukrainian history. This history is more explicitly represented in (old) cities rather than in rural settings. It is symbolically communicated through historical architecture, monuments and a variety of commemorative events. Moreover, since Ukrainian Paganism (as well as its Western counterpart) is an intellectual movement, it is nourished by formal education, including the study of history, which is primarily associated with cities.

Sometimes, Ukrainian Pagans even “compete” for the spiritual importance of their cities. Zhrytsia Iaryna of Native Faith illustrates this tendency. In her narrative about her hometown of L’viv she *paganizes* its history in order to reinforce this city’s significance for contemporary Ukraine. Iaryna used to be deeply concerned that L’viv, founded in the 13th century, is a relatively new city, especially in comparison with the much older city of Kyiv. It was painful for her to hear comments that there were no ancestral (pagan) places in L’viv because there were no pagans in the 13th century. The popular publication *Til’ky u L’vovi* [Only in L’viv], was a great discovery for Iaryna since it showed that the city of L’viv was established on a very spiritually powerful location, namely, that of an ancient pagan shrine, with the *Svitovydove pole* [Svitovyd’s field] in the centre. Iaryna concludes with an air of great pride:

Come to L'viv, a city that is a phenomenon, a city that is a national hero. Do not be surprised that the inhabitants of L'viv have such highly patriotic feelings towards their city. This is because of the mystical features of the space where our town is situated, where a person can feel the true touch of the Gods, the breath of the Universe [...]. (Iaryna, n. d.)⁸

d) Nature in Relationship to Territory and Ethnicity

Adrian Ivakhiv's concept of "territorial ethnicity" is directly related to that of nature. In contrast to constructivist views of ethnicity that dominate in Western Pagan discourse, "territorial" ethnicity is viewed as "naturally" evolving within a particular environment over a long span of time, sometimes as long as millennia (Ivakhiv 2005b). As a result, unlike Western Pagans, to whom nature appears in its own right, Ukrainian Pagans perceive themselves (humans) and nature as one organic whole (Ivakhiv 2005b: 195).

Accordingly, the concept of "nature" is closely tied to concepts of "land," "ethnos," "nation," "blood" and "sacred tradition" (Ivakhiv 2005b). Ethnoses are understood to have "homelands," where they act as "hosts" while minority groups are perceived as "guests" (Ivakhiv 2005b: 206). In the discourse on racism, this approach is similar to that defined as the "biologization of culture" (cf. Bonilla-Silva 2001).

As Ivakhiv observes, a Ukrainian Pagan understanding of "territorial ethnicity" is historically rooted in the intellectual discourse on nature and ethnicity that has evolved in Eastern Europe since the 19th century, following a different path than that of the West. Among the most powerful sources that have shaped the understanding of nature and environmental ethics in Eastern Europe,

he identifies the following: 1) 19th-century Romanticism and folkloristics;⁹ 2) holism, cosmism, and early 20th-century ecological philosophy;¹⁰ 3) Soviet anthropology;¹¹ and 4) the ideas of Lev Gumilev.¹²

These ideas are incorporated into Ukrainian and Russian neo-traditionalist and ethnic nationalist discourses, presenting beliefs in the sacredness of Ukraine or Russia and in the spiritual and “energetic” power of their natural landscapes (Ivakhiv 2005b: 208). In the case of Ukrainian Pagans, these discourses are a response to perceived threats that come from both the East (fear of the returning dominance of Russia) and the West (associated with cosmopolitanism, and the competitive capitalist economy in which Ukraine may lose its identity and become economically oppressed) (Ivakhiv 2005b: 210).

A young male adherent of Ancestral Fire, commenting on the fact that Ukrainian Pagans are often criticized for their nationalist, racist and even somewhat fascist views, attempted to justify these views by connecting them to the concept of nature in its relationship to territory and ethnicity:

...Look at this territory. If it were Zimbabwe and if I said that Ukrainians were the coolest people here, then probably all these -isms [nationalism, racism, and fascism] with which you [journalists/critics] have labeled me would be understandable. However, this is Ukraine, and the nation is Ukrainian,... Ukrainian people. And I, as a representative of the Ukrainian people, I have to be the first and best to serve as an example for others. I do not mind others living on my territory, but only with my permission. Why? Because this is my position...I want to revive those traditions and customs that have existed here from the very beginning. This doesn't mean that I will push away those who live according to our laws and do not defile them... However, I don't want anybody to simply spit on this attitude, thinking that everything is allowed...I am not for this kind of democracy, I am against this kind of democracy. I want there to be order in

Ukraine as naturally should have been formed here. In the end, God gave everybody a land, and this is the land that he gave to Ukrainians. It means that we have a full right to it. (Anonymous, April 28, 2007)¹³

This quote illustrates that, unlike their Western counterparts, for Ukrainian Pagans nature has geographic boundaries and political borders. While Selena Fox speaks about nature in global terms, my interviewee's understanding of this concept is closely linked to the geographic and political territory of Ukraine. Moreover, he sees a direct physical connection between Ukrainian ethnicity (associated with particular traditions and customs) and Ukraine's geographic territory. His wish to revive those traditions and customs that "should have been formed here" "naturally" reflects my interviewee's view of ethnicity as a "natural" entity that evolves in the process of interaction with other humans in the context of a particular natural environment. He also implies that those traditions and customs that "should have been formed" on the territory of Ukraine may not have been formed due to "unnatural" "foreign" interference. This is why my consultant finds it important to revive those traditions that had existed in the "primordial" past, before they were "polluted" by "foreign" customs and ideologies.

He divides people into two categories: "insiders" and "outsiders" or "hosts" and "guests." The insiders belong to the Ukrainian ethnic clan and the outsiders are strangers representing the "other." "Guests" wishing to enter Ukrainian land must seek permission from the ethnic "hosts" of this land.

Nature and Power

“Let us meet near the yoke,” – suggested Zhyvosyl Liutyi, when I contacted him to arrange an interview in the spring of 2007. I recall feeling confused and uncomfortable because the tone of his voice indicated that he was identifying a famous landmark that I did not recognize. I did not want to disclose my ignorance and present myself in an unfavorable light. After an awkward pause in our conversation, he clarified what he meant by the “yoke.” “It is the so called Arc of Friendship of the Peoples,” he said. I began to laugh because it seemed like a good joke, however, Zhyvosyl was absolutely serious.

This landmark is a monument in the shape of a large rainbow (Fig.8-1). It was erected in 1982 by the Soviets in the centre of Kyiv near the bank of the

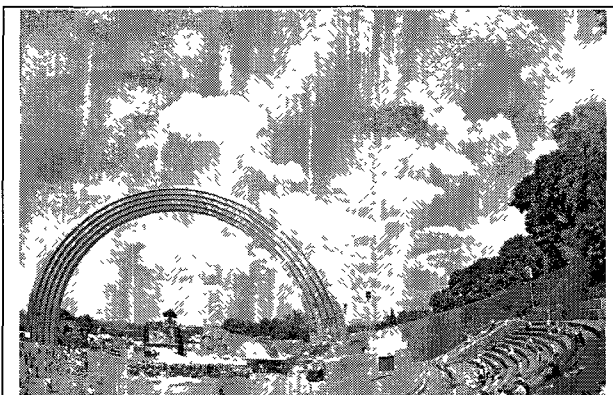


Figure 8 - 2. The Arc of Friendship of the People (Photo from Panoramio, author Annushka77, <http://static.panoramio.com/photos/original/23192875.jpg>)



Figure 8 - 1. Foreground: monument portraying a Russian and Ukrainian workers; background: monument to the Pereiaslav Council (Photo from ukrfoto.net, author Rostik, 2006, <http://ukrfoto.net/photos/Rostiks/1159260799.jpg>).

Dnipro River. Two smaller monuments beneath the rainbow are especially evocative (Fig.8-2). One depicts two workers – Ukrainian and Russian – holding the Soviet state emblem. The second monument represents the participants of the

Pereiaslav Council of 1654. This is a well-known historic event, when Cossack Hetman Bohdan Khmel'nyts'kyi signed a treaty with the Russian Tsar, placing the Cossack State under the military protection of the Russian Empire.

What the Soviets intended as a symbol of great unity between the two peoples, is interpreted by many nationally conscious Ukrainians, including contemporary Pagans, as a historical symbol of the political oppression of Ukraine and its subordination to the “older sister” Russia. To Zhyvosyl and his fellow Pagans, the “yoke” is viewed as a symbol that contributes to the development of a “slave mentality” among Ukrainian people.¹⁴ Paganism has become a form of spirituality that helps its followers free themselves from this “slave mentality” and become masters of their lives and their nation. This sentiment is closely related to the concepts of nature and power as communicated in the creative practices of Pagans. Although Ukrainian Pagans theoretically view themselves and nature as an organic whole, in practice they often distinguish themselves from nature, striving to obtain control over the surrounding environment.

Let me return to Zhyvosyl Liutyi's song “Davni Bohy” [Ancient Gods] (see pages 178-179). In Chapter IV, I discussed the role of this song in the symbolic construction of community. In the context of the following discussion, I will readdress its lyrics to show how traditional folklore and contemporary politics shape Ukrainian Pagans' understanding of their relationship with nature.

As suggested by the phrase “We allowed nature, not idols, to live in our holy place,” for Zhyvosyl, nature appears in folkloric terms. In standard

Ukrainian, “idols” [ідоли] is a derogatory word referring to pre-Christian Gods and Goddesses and their sculptural depictions. Zhyvosyl rejects this negative connotation, insisting on a positive interpretation of ancestral beliefs. To him, these idols are profound because they are rooted in the surrounding natural environment.

In these lyrics, the narrator positions his people as “us.” He does not place “us” within the system of old ancestral beliefs, but rather as outside observers and evaluators of those beliefs. Contemporary Ukrainian Pagans may not necessarily believe in the magical power of spirits, but Zhyvosyl is proud that their ancestors had such a rich belief system (“Well, where else are such a people?...”).

Ukrainian Pagans strive to build a “traditional” society by reviving its rich “traditional” religion. Their understanding of religion fits the classical definitions of religion offered by Edward Tylor and James G. Frazer. Tylor views religion in traditional societies as a belief in spiritual beings (Tylor 1873), while Frazer sees it as “a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and human life” (Frazer 1948 [1922]: 50).¹⁵ However, are the old Slavic spiritual beings as presented in Zhyvosyl Liutyi’s song treated as superior powers? Lines like “**We allowed** nature... to live in our holy place...,” “**We established** a house for them [Slavic spiritual beings],” “...those [spiritual beings] whom **we saved**,” “house spirits live in the houses that **we have sanctified**” suggest, rather, the opposite.

On one hand, these lyrics suggest that Ukrainian Pagans have a deep respect for nature by trying to preserve those folkloric elements in which nature-

related beliefs are reflected. On the other hand, they also suggest that contemporary Ukrainian Pagans strive to consciously maintain control over their world. While the majority of Western Pagans stress the idea of living in harmony with nature (as Selena Fox views herself as “part of...large family of nature, not the master of it”), many Ukrainian Pagans demonstrate an attempt to gain control over natural forces, as exemplified by Zhyvosyl’s song. They “craft their relationship” with nature in a different way than their Western counterparts. Ukrainian Pagans grant nature permission “to live in [their] holy place.”

Some Ukrainian Pagans also manifest their power over nature through the use of magic, believing this to be a continuation of the tradition of their ancestors. A *Slavlennia* ritual conducted by Ancestral Fire’s leader Volodymyr Kurovs’kyi on the *Zamkova hora* [Castle mountain] in Kyiv illustrates this. During the course of the ritual, while all participants were standing in a circle glorifying their Gods and Goddesses, it suddenly began to rain. Kurovs’kyi put away his service book, and addressed the participants of the ritual. He encouraged them to gather up their inner energy, invoking the power of Native Gods, in order to turn away the rain. Kurovs’kyi’s charismatic action was accompanied by his artfully improvised poetic oration, *ordering* the rain to stop.¹⁶

The rain stopped immediately. Although skeptics may argue that the rain could have stopped on its own, this is not the way Kurovs’kyi and his followers view this situation. Kurovs’kyi’s behaviour and the tone of his voice during this religious practice deserve special attention. He did not attempt to “craft a relationship with nature.” He gave direct orders to nature.

In a later interview, Kurovs'kyi recalled another occasion, when on a very sunny day he asked Father Dazhboh, the Sun-god, to partially cover his face because the intense light prevented his congregation from concentrating on their spiritual activity. According to Kurovs'kyi, clouds immediately covered the sun, amazing the journalists who were filming this ritual. Kurovs'kyi is convinced that any Slavic person can control (and this is the term he often uses himself) natural



Figure 10-3. Male adherents of Ancestral Fire attempting to stop the rain. *Kupalo Wreath* [Купальський вінок] festival, Trukhaniv island, Kyiv, summer 2008.

forces according to his or her will, since Kurovs'kyi is convinced that the old Slavs had such powers. Kurovs'kyi argues that it is precisely their power over nature that led them to agricultural prosperity (Kurovs'kyi, May 16, 2007).

One question continued to trouble me: “What if magic does not work?” Although Kurovs'kyi insists that this never happens to him, I observed just such a situation in the summer of 2008, during Ancestral Fire’s *Kupalo wreath* [Купальський вінок] festival. On one of the days of the festival, it was raining heavily. As I approached the Ancestral Fire camp, I noticed a number of topless men walking within a circle around the fire and performing various martial movements in the air. It was explained to me that these men were trying to stop

the rain that was interfering with various spiritual and educational activities at the camp.¹⁷

The ritual lasted for a relatively long period of time (approximately an hour). The rain gradually stopped. Realizing that both insiders and outsiders may question whether this was indeed a result of their magical activity and, if it had been, why the rain had not stopped earlier, the leaders provided the following explanation. They emphasized that as a festival (as opposed to a purely spiritual ceremony meant for exclusively insiders) *Kupal's'kyi vinok* attracted many new people. These individuals may have had various reasons for attending the event. Spiritual fulfillment may not necessarily have been a driving force for everyone. Many attended purely out of curiosity. According to the leaders, when people who do not fully belong in the sacred circle participate in Pagan rituals, it renders these rituals less effective. What is even more interesting is not the way they justified the outcome of their magical ceremony but, rather, their unwillingness to question their own power over nature. They refused to accept that, in at least some instances, nature may not obey their will.¹⁸

Carol Christ's discussion of will in the ritual of Goddess Worship can help us understand the role of will in the Ukrainian Pagan case. Christ considers the concept of a woman's will to be a female response to Christianity, a patriarchal religion within which a woman's will is suppressed (Christ 2006: 52-53). While gender does not play a major role in our case, the notion of individual will can be viewed as a response to the Soviet situation where the will of the individual was not tolerated.

Ukrainian Pagans' attempts to control nature are also a response to their collective memory of the political and spiritual oppression that led to the development of the "slave mentality." The desire of Ukrainian Pagans to obtain control over nature supports Oboler's argument that it is not only religion that shapes social norms. This is rather a two-way process. Our case demonstrates that it is actually the reality of socio-political life connected with resistance to colonial oppression that influences Ukrainian Pagans to seek alternative religious symbols and spiritual models.

The power of individual will over natural forces plays an important role in the construction of an alternative national identity in the post-Soviet context. Ukrainian Pagans strive to be empowered individuals. Ukrainian Pagans refuse to be treated as "slaves." They prefer the position of "masters" of their own home.

¹ See Adrian Ivakhiv 2005b: 194 for a detailed list of Western sources that discuss Paganism as Nature Religion.

² Marion Bowman, while focusing on a Pagan community in Newfoundland and a pan-Pagan gathering in Atlantic Canada, explores Pagan pluralism related to this concept. She illustrates how Pagans' attitudes to nature and the natural vary, "[d]epending on what brand of paganism people subscribe to, what past they seek to recapture, or what future they hope to create." Bowman's major focus is on food, which "can be an important (possibly the most important) indicator of a relationship with, or within, nature." Bowman shows how some Pagans consider hunting and eating of animals a natural human experience. In contrast, others view "the consumption and/or exploitation of fellow live beings as an abomination" and disrespectful to nature (Bowman 2000a).

³ For in-depth discussions of the interconnection between Paganism and various branches of environmentalism, see also Taylor 1993, 1997, and 2004, among his other works.

⁴ See, for example, Read's documentary *Goddess Remembered* (1989).

⁵ <http://anastasia-lviv.razom.eu/poseleennia/poseleennia.html>

⁶ <http://alatyr.org.ua/forum/viewtopic.php?t=1492>

⁷ Internet forum: "Creation of Pagan settlement," <http://alatyr.org.ua/forum/viewtopic.php?t=1492>, last consulted September 21, 2010.

⁸ [...] Приїжджайте у Львів, місто-феномен, місто-національний герой. Не дивуйтеся, чому такі великі патріотичні відчуття у львів'ян. Цим завдячуємо таємничій властивості простору, на якому стоїть наше рідне місто, де людина може відчутти істинний дотик Богів, подих Всесвіту...

⁹ The role of German thinkers such as Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) was crucial in shaping 19th century Romanticism and folklore studies, and, by extension, an understanding of nature and people. Herder stresses the collective personality of each *Volk*, believing that it is characterized by commonly shared beliefs, customs and traditions that, in turn, are shaped by a particular geographic environment and climate (Ivakhiv 2005b: 203; Herder 1784). This is the

context, in which the view of ethnos as “an inherently territorial phenomenon” originated (Ivakhiv 2005b 203)

¹⁰ In the early twentieth-century, German biologist Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919) introduced the term “ecology.” Initially ecological philosophy was closely related to Darwin’s evolutionist ideas. While Anglo-American adherents of this philosophy further developed it into a political focus on the individual, their German and Russian counterparts tended to think about “the ‘laws of nature’ as governing humans primarily at the collective level of nations or societies” (Ivakhiv 2005b 204). In imperial Russia, the notion of *sobornost* (social community) was a significant foundation for the holistic understanding of “an organic connection between people (specifically the rural peasantry), society (as represented by the church and the tsar), and the land (‘mother Russia’)” (Ivakhiv 2005b 204).

This understanding of holism found its way into the Soviet system as a result of some influential thinkers of the early twentieth century. Among them was the Soviet scientist V I Vernadsky, who introduced the idea of “noosphere,” the collective energy of human thought that constitutes a significant part of the biosphere. According to Vernadsky, human thought plays a crucial role in geological evolution and enables humans “to cooperate with nature as a complementary part of a living and thinking organism” (Ivakhiv 2005b 205, Vernadsky 1945, 1967, 1994). This tradition of Russian philosophy became known as *Cosmism*. Cosmistic writers further connected these ideas with “mystical utopianism, cosmic speculation, and Russian messianism” (Ivakhiv 2005b 205). In the 1920s-1930s, some Russian emigre thinkers connected these issues with the ideas of the centrality of Russia as a civilization that combined the highest achievements of Asia and Europe.

¹¹ For example, the Soviet anthropologist L V Oshanin contributed to the development of the discourse on “territorial ethnicity” by introducing the concept of *ethnogenesis* to explain the historical process of the formation of an ethnos (Ivakhiv 2005b 206).

¹² Lev Gumilev (1912-1992), whose ideas became very influential in the last decades of the Soviet Union, connected the idea of ethnogenesis with the ecological and geopolitical foundation of the Russian nation. He viewed each ethnos as a “biosocial organism” that consists of a complex mixture of behavioral models. In his opinion, this organism organically evolves, developing profound ties with its surrounding environment (Ivakhiv 2005b 207, Gumilev 1989). Gumilev finds it very important for an ethnos to live in harmony with its environment. He is against any ethnic mixing which, in his view, leads to the destruction of an ethnos. Within this framework, Gumilev views cosmopolitanism as dangerous because of its rootlessness (Ivakhiv 2005b 208, Gumilev 1989).

¹³ Подивіться на оцю територію. Якби вона була Зімбabwe, і я б сказав, що українці самі круті, ну тоді, напевне, усі ці –ізми [расизм, нацизм і фашизм], які ви мені ви [журналісти] причислили і приліпили, мали би дійсно місце, але це Україна і нація - українці, український народ. І я, як представник українського народу, я маю бути тут першим і вищим, щоб по мені орієнтувалися. Я не проти того, щоби хтось жив на моїй землі, але з мого дозволу. Чому? Тому що є така позиція. Я хочу повернути ті традиції [і] звичаї, які в нас були від початку. Це не означає, що я буду виштохувати когось, хто за нашими законами живе і не сміє. Але я не хочу, щоби хтось інший ну просто таки плював на це ставлення, рахуючи, що єсть така всюдозволеність. Я не за таку демократію, я проти такої демократії. Я хочу щоби в Україні був той порядок речей, який **природньо мусів би скластися тут**. Врешті-решт, Бог кожному роздавав землю, і українцям він дав цю. Значить, ми маємо повне право на неї.

¹⁴ In traditional agriculture, a yoke was a wooden beam placed upon two oxen to force them to pull together.

¹⁵ These classical definitions of religion are considered too narrow by contemporary scholars. The present-day academic discourse on religion is greatly influenced by sociologist Emile Durkheim, who proposed to understand religion in its relationship to society, distinguishing between the sacred and the profane. To Durkheim, religion does not necessarily carry supernatural characteristics but it does embrace those ideas and values that are considered sacred within a particular society (see Durkheim 1965).

¹⁶ In particular, Kurovs’kyi said the following:

I ask you, brothers and sisters, to raise your hands up and feel how a spiritual fire appears inside of you Now put your hands down below your stomach and feel how a great powerful fire of our Clan begins to warm up and burn Feel now how it begins warm up inside of you [Kurovs'kyi is breathing deeply] And, whether you are a man or a woman, you fill up with the fire, emotions and flame And you connect with the fire [Meanwhile one of the male followers of this group blows and fans the fire] Only a fire of light, a fire desiring light And now we slowly raise this fire over our spiritual tree, we raise it upwards [slowly raises his hands up and apart] and see how our fires connect into a Svarha And there is a flaming Svarha, alatyr, there It begins to rotate above us, creating a golden flaming shield, and wipes off the clouds, and creates a fire above our hill, and does not give water any access to it, and protects us [Kurovs'kyi raises his voice] And father Symarhl is coming to us, and father Stryboh is coming to us, and protect us and create a starry shield, a flaming shield, protecting our ritual of Slavlennia Let it be so Glory to our Gods! [following the leader, all the participants put their hand down] Let us close our eyes and maintain this aspiration, close our eyes and see this spiritual stream of light that comes from us, from our fire and moves up to the Svarha and opens like a shield, like an umbrella above us, protecting us from rain [Raising his voice again] We call father Stryboh to come to us with his powerful forces and to move the clouds away so that the light of Dazhboh would shine upon us and enlighten our hearts with virgin holiness Let our incantations and our souls confirm themselves in Java, and let the light and good weather appear [Crosses his arms around his chest area and bows before the fire The participants do the same]

Прошу підняти побратимів і посестер руки догори і відчути як в середині вашій народжується духовний вогонь Тепер опустіть руки собі на живіт на нижню главу і відчуйте, як там починає розпалюватись, загоратися потужний вогонь, вогонь нашого Роду Відчуйте, як всередині вас починає тепліти [Kurovs'kyi begins to breath deeply] І незалежно від того, чи чоловік ви чи жінка, ви наповнюєтеся вогнем, емоцією, паланням І ви з'єднуєтеся з вогнем [Meanwhile one of the male followers of this group blows and fans the fire] Лише світлий вогонь, вогонь прагнення світла А тепер повільно піднімаємо цей вогонь нашим духовним деревом, піднімаємо його вверх [slowly raises his hands up and apart] і бачимо, як наші вогні вверх з'єднуються у Сваргу І над нами вогняна Сварга, алатир Він починає крутитися над нами, творячи над нами золотисто-вогняний щит, і розмітає хмари і творить вогонь над нашою горою, і не дає доступу до води, і захищає нас [Raising his voice] І йде до нас батько Симаргл, і йде до нас батько Стрибог, і захищає нас і творить щит зоряний, щит вогняний, захищаючи Славлення наше Хай буде так Слава Богам! [following the leader, all the participants put their hand down] Закрили очі і утримаємо це прагнення, закрили очі і бачимо цей духовний потік світла, який йде від нас, від нашого вогнища і піднімається до Сварги і розкривається як щит, як парасоля над нами, захищаючи нас від дощу А батько Стрибог силами своїми могутніми піднімається і розносить хмари, аби над нами панувало світло [Raising his voice again] Кличемо батька Стрибога, аби прийшов до нас з силами своїми могутніми, і аби потурих хмари темні, і щоб запалилося над нами світло Дажбоже, і осяяло душі наші святістю пречистою І хай замовляння наші і образ душі нашої утвердяться в Яві, і запанує світло над нами і погода добра Хай буде так [Crosses his arms around his chest area and bows before the fire The participants do the same]

¹⁷ Women cannot participate in these rituals because women attract water This interpretation is likely influenced by Boris Rybakov's ideas

¹⁸ Pagans' unwillingness to question their power over nature, at least in public, is also partly connected with their "marketing" strategies Although many Pagans claim that they do not represent a missionary religion and thus, do not need to attract more people, they do strive to present themselves in a favourable light to the larger society

CHAPTER IX

“This Is Indeed Ours!”:

Religious Syncretism in Ukrainian Paganism

In the spring of 2007, while conducting fieldwork in L’viv, western Ukraine, I met a young male representative of Ancestral Fire, who was especially enthusiastic about his group’s calendar and life cycle rituals. He finds them spiritually and socially meaningful and also aesthetically pleasing. While discussing Pagan marriages, I asked the young man to describe those wedding rituals that he had either observed or participated in. Having listened to his description, I expressed my surprise at the similarity to weddings as they are currently celebrated in many Ukrainian villages by people who identify themselves as Christians. His response was: “Exactly. When you accept Native Faith you don’t really feel like you’ve changed religions. You just begin to look at certain things from a different angle and perceive them on a different level.”

I had another similar encounter that was somewhat humorous in nature. In the summer of 2008, I attended several RUNVira services in L’viv. One Sunday, my brother accompanied me to take photographs while I videotaped the weekly Holy Hour of a local RUNVira community. After the service, my brother, himself a Christian, confessed that he almost made the sign of the cross several times during the Holy Hour because, to him, it greatly resembled an Eastern Christian service. My impression of the service was similar. This seemed intriguing and somewhat paradoxical, considering that Ukrainian Pagans and especially the

followers of RUNVira perceive Christianity as one of their major ideological enemies.

The above encounters address religious syncretism in contemporary Ukrainian Paganism. In the first case, this blend is a result of cultural contact between present-day Paganism and the rural folklore that many Pagans strive to achieve. The second case suggests an overlap between the RUNVira and Eastern Christian traditions of worship.

In general, syncretism in modern Ukrainian Paganism is very complex and embraces many traditions and belief systems. These include old Slavic paganism, Christianity (both official and popular beliefs and practices) and non-Ukrainian elements (both spiritual and secular). While embracing two or even all three systems simultaneously, contemporary Paganism often results in intriguing new cultural and religious forms. Particular syncretic forms give use to interesting theoretical issues: the construction of leaders' charisma; representation of the past with the help of present-day sources; and adaptation to new contexts.

The Concept of Syncretism

Now let me focus on the concept of religious syncretism in academic discourse, especially on those ideas that are relevant to the analysis of our phenomenon. Scholars often argue that syncretic religious forms are the unavoidable outcome of cultural contact. The concept of religious syncretism was revisited by anthropologists Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw, the editors of *Syncretism/Anti-syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis* (2004 [1994]).

These scholars deny the existence of cultural purity, adhering to the idea of culture as a process that most often results in “invented” traditions (Shaw and Stewart 2004 [1994]: 1-25). They define syncretism simply as “synthesis of different religious forms,” suggesting that the idea that all cultures are essentially syncretic is no longer questioned (Shaw and Stewart 2004 [1994]: i).

However, the editors and contributors to this volume problematize this concept, drawing upon numerous historical examples where such synthesis takes place. Stewart and Shaw focus both on forms of religious syncretism and the socio-political perspectives of those who define these forms as syncretic. For example, some people criticize institutions such as the African Independent (Christian) Churches because their ideologies and practices are combined with local ideas and forms. From their perspective, such churches are viewed as ethnocentric, “impure” and “inauthentic.” When applied in such cases, the term “syncretism” carries a negative connotation. In other contexts this concept may have positive implications. Syncretism can be viewed as a mode of resistance to oppression, as a form of connection with a forgotten history, as a means of the construction of a national identity (Shaw and Stewart 2004 [1994]: i).

Importantly, contributors to this volume strive to demonstrate that when cultures come into contact they mutually influence each other. They challenge the idea of cultural influence as a one-way process that implies the existence of a dominant and subordinate culture, when members of the subordinate culture must accept the dominant culture, gradually reaching “some ultimate completion.” In

contrast, Stewart and Shaw insist that syncretism be understood as a two-way process (Shaw and Stewart 2004 [1994]: 6).

Although Steven Kaplan does not explicitly use the term “syncretism,” he presents a similar understanding of religious synthesis in his conceptual framework for the interaction of two religious systems in Africa. Kaplan proposes six terms that identify “modes of adaptation” of African religious practices to Christianity for an understanding of the different levels of their mutual influence. *Toleration* refers to the situation (especially in the time of early European Christian missionaries to Africa), where Christian missionaries agree to certain local practices even though they consider them “incompatible with a true Christian life” (Kaplan 1995:10). Christian missionaries found it impossible or impractical to immediately eliminate such practices. They hoped that local customs would gradually fade away on their own (Kaplan 1995:11). Kaplan’s second mode, *translation*, refers to the interpretation of Christian concepts in terms of local idioms that make the former more easily understandable to the local population. The next concept, *assimilation*, deals with introducing elements from local customs into Christian rituals. In Africa, this was done not because it was considered especially meaningful but, rather, because Christian missionaries wanted “to make the message of the Christian ritual more comprehensible and acceptable to [their] congregants” (Kaplan 1995:15). The next mode is *Christianization*, which is the process of creating “Christian versions of traditional...rites and practices” (Kaplan 1995:16). In contrast to the previous modes of adaptation, within *Christianization*, local religious elements are viewed

as potentially meaningful and valuable “for the development of a Christian life in a Christian community” (Kaplan 1995:16). The next concept, *acculturation*, is connected with the conscious preservation of those elements of local practices that Western missionaries consider valuable for Christianity. In contrast to *tolerance*, *acculturation* is characterized by a much more positive attitude from Christian missionaries toward local religious practices (Kaplan 1995:19). In contrast to *Christianization*, where the main focus is on the social context of the Christian community, “proponents of acculturation sought to work within the traditional institutional framework, seeking to preserve and even restore ‘traditional’ tribal life” (Kaplan 1995:20). The last mode, *incorporation*, deals with the introduction of indigenous concepts to the Church. In contrast to other modes of adaptation, the representatives of this paradigm “consciously seek to introduce [local] elements into the wider Church” because they find these motifs spiritually beneficial for the Church (Kaplan 1995:21).

The above-mentioned scholars concentrate both on syncretic forms as the result of cultural contacts in particular contexts and on the roles of these forms in given religious traditions. The works of these and other academics will help us to further explore the multilayered synthesis of various religious traditions in contemporary Ukrainian Paganism, with a special focus on the forms and roles of syncretic elements in the contemporary Pagan movement. However, I propose to expand these scholars’ definition of syncretism. This concept usually implies the blending of two or more *existing* traditions when they come in contact with each

other. In our case, a *new* religion is being created on the basis of the synthesis of elements from various traditions.

Syncretism within Ukrainian Christianity

Contemporary Ukrainian Pagans, either consciously or unconsciously, embrace Christian elements that, in turn, are also syncretic. Ukrainian Christian traditions often possess characteristics that have very little, if anything, to do with the Bible or official Christian doctrine, at least from the perspective of contemporary Christian spirituality. Some elements of Ukrainian Christian beliefs and practices suggest pagan origins while others may be more recent creations. Some have found their way into formal church rituals while others, although rejected or ignored by the official Church, still function on the popular level.

Many East European ethnographers find that with the establishment of Christianity on Slavic territories, a great number of pagan motifs were adapted and modified by church. Volodymyr Hnatiuk, while comparing the Slavic pagan worldview represented in primary historical sources and folk (peasant) beliefs of his time, argues that attributes of many pagan gods and goddesses became eventually incorporated into characteristics of Christian saints. For example, the characteristics of Perun, god of thunder and lightning, were applied to Saint Illia (Elijah) while the functions of Veles, god of cattle and prosperity, became associated with Saint Iurii (George) in some areas of Ukraine or Saint Nykolai (Nicholas) in other regions (Hnatiuk 1912: vii).

Besides individual gods and goddesses blending into Christian saints, several other holidays of pagan origins are understood to have been adapted by the Christian calendar. Among these is Velykden' [Easter], originally the celebration of spring (Hnatiuk 1912: vii). Hnatiuk proposes that those parts of the Easter celebration that were not originally associated with the Christian Church were pre-Christian elements that became accepted by this institution. For example, blessing *pysanky* (decorated Easter eggs) and various foods (Easter bread *paska*, cheese, eggs, meat, butter and others) after the Liturgy on Easter Sunday became a constituent component of the official celebration of Easter for Ukrainian Eastern Rite Christians. These syncretic elements are also often associated with some local popular beliefs and practices that are not necessarily recognized by the official Church. For instance, in some rural areas of late 19th century western Ukraine, the bones of meat blessed on Easter were buried in a field in order to protect the crop from hail (Chubinskii 1872a: 23).

Unfortunately, there is not enough primary contextual information for us to conceptualize the early stage of interaction between Christianity and paganism in terms of Kaplan's conceptual framework. It is known that Christianity was forcefully imposed upon the people of Kyivan Rus'. As old church records demonstrate, at the early stages of Christianity, clergy sharply criticized the peasants of Kyivan Rus' for their "ungodly" beliefs in natural forces.¹ This information indicates that the peasants maintained their pre-Christian beliefs and rituals for some period of time. Thus, possibly, in early Christian times, pagan

motifs were *tolerated* by the Church with the hope that they would eventually wither away.

Over time, however, the Church's views regarding local beliefs and practices could have changed allowing certain pagan elements to be included into Christian rituals, as in the case of *pysanky* and foods blessed on Easter. Perhaps, this situation was similar to Kaplan's mode of *assimilation*. Introducing the Easter concept of the Resurrection of Christ based on the model of the resurrection of nature helped facilitate the spread of Christian messages in Kyivan Rus'.

In more recent times, Ukrainian Byzantine Christian churches came to play a crucial role in the formation of a distinct national identity in both Ukraine and the diaspora.² It is precisely folk (peasant) elements, especially those that are widely believed to have pre-Christian origins, that have come to play a significant role in the process of the construction of a national identity through the Church,



Figure 9 - 1. 1976. Easter bazaar organized by the Ukrainian Catholic Women's League of Canada, Church of the Holy Spirit branch in Hamilton, Ontario. Ukrainian Easter eggs and breads as well as embroidered items are displayed for sale (From *Nasha Doroha* 4 (1976): 10).

not only in peasant contexts but also in urban centres. For example, blessing *pysanky* in church on Easter Sunday is now at least as much about being Ukrainian as it is about a certain form of spirituality (cf. Lesiv 2005).

The dominance of peasant elements over any other cultural forms can be partly explained by the fact that

peasant motifs (unlike many kinds of elite culture) are easily recognizable as

Ukrainian because they are closely linked to a particular geographical territory (Kononenko and Lesiv, forthcoming).

Peasant elements are found spiritually and socially beneficial for the Church. The Church, in turn, plays an important role in the process of national identity building. In this way, Ukrainian churches of the Byzantine Rite indigenize (global) Christianity. This situation resembles the one identified by Kaplan as *incorporation*.

However, as Hnatiuk, among others, points out, those elements that are now recognized as remnants of the old pagan worldviews do not exist in their original forms or in the shape that they had at the early stages of Christianity. On the contrary, they must have been modified and changed under various influences over time (Hnatiuk 1912: vii-viii). Natalie Kononenko observes interesting dynamics in contemporary popular Christian culture in Eastern Ukraine, as expressed through recent changes and new creations based on Soviet influences. In particular, while discussing contemporary beliefs and practices connected with the concepts of death and the afterlife period, Kononenko finds that these beliefs are influenced by images of Soviet life. For example, her female informants described *mytarstva* (pl.), a kind of purgatory, where the soul is tested before it obtains permission to enter heaven. After death, the soul leaves the body and goes on a forty day journey through this purgatory. In describing this journey, one of Kononenko's informants mentioned that *mytarstva* "are like tollbooths or custom checkpoints at a border crossing." Each tollbooth deals with a particular sin, and "at each tollbooth the person's guilt in relationship to that sin is checked." On the

basis of this test, permission to proceed to the next tollbooth is either granted or denied. Another informant emphasizes, “there are demons at every single one of this checkpoints” and they are the best bookkeepers. They provide very detailed records of every sin, including the hour each was committed. After going through all the *mytarstva*, the soul proceeds to God, who decides whether it belongs in heaven or in hell. In order to enter heaven, the soul must present a document, a “prayer part of the *prokhidna*, the piece of paper bought in church and stored in the funeral bundle.” Many women compare this document with the Soviet internal passport, like they do with *mytarstva* (Kononenko 2006: 63). (The internal passport was a mandatory document for every Soviet citizen at the age of sixteen and older. One could not enter any sphere of the Soviet life without this document).

Intriguingly, the Soviet bureaucratic system provided popular Ukrainian Christianity with imagery from everyday life: *mytarstva* are paralleled with Soviet border control stations while *prokhidna* is compared to a Soviet passport (Kononenko 2006: 68). While belief in *mytarstva* existed in pre-Soviet times, apparently, it was easier for people to explain their understanding of the cosmos in terms of Soviet bureaucracy. This situation is similar to that defined by Kaplan as *translation*.

The Concept of *Dvoievir'ia* [Dual Belief System]

The situation in Ukrainian Christianity that demonstrates the synthesis of Christian elements with those that are believed to have pagan origins has been

identified by Eastern European scholars since the 19th century as *dvoievir'ia* (Ukr.) or *dvoieverie* (Rus.) meaning dual belief system. This way of thinking was inspired by early ethnographers contributing to the discourse of nation-state. Early ethnographers often purposely tried to trace what they called the survivals of pagan elements in the folk practices of their time in order to claim antiquity for their nations.

Recently, the concept of *dvoievir'ia/dvoieverie* received criticism from some academics in the West. Somewhat in line with Hnatiuk's idea presented above, American historian Christine Worobec argues that the weakness of this models lies in its assumption that nineteenth-century folk beliefs and practices "mirrored those of the ancient past." In addition, this framework does not explain reality in indigenous terms and does not examine "the belief systems of the masses on their merits." Worobec argues that one cannot limit the term "Christian" to "a tiny spiritual and educated elite that knew how to interpret evangelical texts and church dogma correctly." Even if their rituals and beliefs were not always approved by the church, Ukrainian and other East European peasants "believed themselves to be practitioners of Orthodoxy, drawing upon Christian symbols and magical rites to guard against the vagaries of everyday life" (Worobec 2006: 15-16).

Like Worobec, Eve Levin, an American specialist on medieval Russia, suggests that beliefs be carefully examined from the perspective of their practitioners. Levin focuses on medieval Christianity, insisting that it should be studied as it was experienced in the medieval context, rather than from the point

of view of modern Christian spirituality. She points out that many elements that are now ascribed to superstitious paganism were characteristic for medieval Christianity. On the basis of her contextual analysis of medieval Christianity, Levin argues against the idea that all Christian holidays and saints have pagan roots and/or are simply replacements of pagan beliefs and practices (although she does not reject that many of them could be). On the contrary, many have direct Christian origins (Levin 1993: 41-46).

Despite these criticisms from Western scholars, the concept of *dvoievir'ia* still widely circulates in Eastern Europe in both academic circles and at the popular level. As for contemporary Pagans, this concept is not only recognized, but has also come to serve as an important instrument in the building of their spiritualities and identities. These believers are firmly convinced that contemporary folk beliefs and practices contain many remnants of ancient Slavic paganism. To them, the concept of *dvoievir'ia* is an academic confirmation of their idea that the views and practices of their ancestors have been “contaminated” and “polluted” over time by a different belief system, namely, Christianity. Furthermore, Pagans are convinced that (Ukrainian) Christianity has hardly introduced anything new. Rather, it has developed on the basis of old pagan models. While appropriating perceived pagan motifs into their contemporary practices, Ukrainian Pagans strive to “cleanse” these practices of any “foreign” Christian layers.

In contrast to Ukrainian villagers who may not distinguish between pagan and Christian elements in their everyday life, contemporary Pagans consciously

distinguish between what, in their opinion, belonged to their ancestors and what did not. In this respect, the term *dvoievir'ia* becomes an indigenized and legitimate term for contemporary Ukrainian Pagans.

Syncretism in Contemporary Ukrainian Paganism

a) Constructing Charisma

Christian motifs, both official and popular, used by Ukrainian Pagans include not only material objects and visual images but also certain Christian ideas and patterns of behaviour. Let us consider how the founder of RUNVira, Lev Sylenko, speaks of himself. He proclaims himself a Prophet sent to his fellow Ukrainians by God. However, in this case the concept of God is presented as understood by the ancestors of contemporary Ukrainians and, more specifically, as Sylenko believes it was understood. Sylenko describes his experience in the following way: “God’s grace came upon me, and following the will of God I have proclaimed a new understanding of God” (Sylenko 1996: 246). Sylenko could feel the “breath of his Ancestors” [*дыхання предків*] in his soul and was united with them “through divine holiness” [*божественною святістю*] (Sylenko 1996: 16-17). Sylenko identifies his relationship with his ancestors in the following way:

I was born out of their love. And this is why I love everything that is my own as devotedly and tenderly as they loved it. Their blood flows in my blood. Their souls live in my soul. They are my love. They are my Saints. (Sylenko 1996: 18)

Sylenko strives to legitimize his role as RUNVira Prophet via the ideas of vision and spirit possession that became embraced by Christianity. Specifically,

he claims possession of the spirits of his ancestors and their God. These ideologically syncretic ideas help Sylenko to consolidate his authoritative position. Robert Weller views the concepts of vision and spirit possession (characteristic for many new religious movements) “as a means to recruit and retain the enthusiasm of followers” (Weller 1994: 91). I will return to these issues after introducing some other examples of Sylenko’s writings dealing with his self-identification. The following is an excerpt from one of Sylenko’s poems, where he introduces his mission as a Prophet:

I have come, my dear native tribes,
From your truths, sources and sufferings...

Slaves with evil tongues will go against me.
They will destroy the free orchard of my thoughts.
“A false prophet is coming!” – the faceless children of slavery
will be saying, laughing at me...

I say: “O lost ones, come back,
I am bringing you the Native Faith from Heaven,
Open your hearts, do not hold aloof,
I have risen for the joy of [my] people.” (Sylenko 1969:7)

In terms of its style, metaphors, and linguistic turns, this poem resonates with many Biblical lines, especially those devoted to Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem, where he is rejected by the Jews as a false Messiah. Jesus reacts to this situation in the following way:

“Most assuredly, I say to you, He who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life...” (John 5:24)³

“But I know that you have not the love of God within you. I have come in My Father’s name, and you do not receive me; if another comes in his own name, him you will receive.” (John 5: 43)

“I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. All that the Father gives you will come to me; and him who

comes to me I will not cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me..." (John 6:35)

Many parallels can be traced between the figure of Lev Sylenko as presented in his poem and that of Jesus Christ as portrayed in the Bible. While Jesus was born from the Holy Spirit, Sylenko was born from the love of his ancestors. While Jesus comes down from heaven in the name of his Father to save the world, Sylenko comes in the name of his ancestors to save his fellow Ukrainians. Moreover, Sylenko metaphorically uses the Biblical concept of resurrection [воссресіння] associated with Jesus to describe his mission. Like Jesus who speaks for his Father, Sylenko speaks for his ancestors. As was Jesus, he is aware of the fact that he will not be immediately well received by all his people. Like Jesus, he promises salvation to those who fully accept him. In general, Sylenko views his mission as similar to that of Jesus Christ and communicates it with the help of particular linguistic means. Such symbolic associations with the dominant religion and its main spiritual figure significantly contribute to the construction of Sylenko's own charisma.

The idea of charisma and leadership is addressed by anthropologist Clifford Geertz, known for his theoretical approach to culture as a symbolic system. One of his studies is devoted to what he calls the "symbolics of power" in three historical contexts: sixteenth-century England, fourteen-century Java, and nineteenth-century Morocco. Specifically, Geertz (1983) focuses on the construction of charisma by the leaders of these societies.

Geertz's understanding of charisma is different from that of Max Weber who was the first to introduce this concept in academic discourse. Weber views charisma predominantly in Christian terms, as a divine gift:

[Charisma is] a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual is concerned and treated as a leader. (Weber 1947: 358-359)

Geertz expands the definition of this concept by illustrating that one's charisma can be socially constructed and reinforced. In particular, he shows how certain symbolic elements (material attributes, language, particular actions or patterns of human behavior) contribute to the formation and reinforcement of the leaders' charisma which, in turn, plays a significant role in the consolidation of particular communities around a central authority figure.

Geertz demonstrates that symbolic elements involved in this process are often rooted in the religious ideologies and traditions of particular societies and, thus, have to be studied in their contexts. For example, he illustrates how the *deliberate construction of Elizabeth Tudor's charisma through her ritualized behavior and with the help of visual means reflected Protestant values and beliefs in England. The queen allegorically identified herself with the virtues ordained by God: "Chastity, Wisdom, Peace, Perfect Beauty, and Pure Religion"* (Geertz 1983: 129). To provide another example, in Islamic nineteenth-century Morocco, the Sultan's charisma was predominantly constructed through the impression of great energy and motion. The king did not usually stay in one place but constantly

and ritualistically shifted his court among different cities of his empire, creating the impression of being able to be everywhere at once, like God (Geertz 1983: 136-7).

As in the cases examined by Geertz, Sylenko's authority and charisma become reinforced with the help of symbolic associations with Christian concepts that are familiar to the majority of Ukrainians. In other words, Sylenko's authority becomes constructed on the basis of a well-known pre-existing model, with its well established definition of (spiritual) power.

Sylenko's charisma, as understood in Weber's terms, cannot be underestimated either. In fact, he is remembered by many as a very dynamic and talented individual with great oratorical skills. "Everything became quiet, and the ground shook when he spoke," mentioned one Ukrainian Canadian, who remembered when Sylenko came to Edmonton, Alberta, in the 1970s to proclaim his RUNVira ideas. It is rather both kinds of Sylenko's charisma – "natural" and culturally reinforced – that exist in dialogue with each other.⁴

To provide another example of how syncretic elements play an instrumental role in reinforcing leaders' charisma, let us consider some basic characteristics of RUNVira in practice. In particular, let us focus on physical space as organized within RUNVira rituals. While their polytheistic counterparts conduct their sacred ceremonies predominantly outdoors and in a circle (Fig.9-2), RUNVira followers gather mainly indoors (either in their own temple or in a rented room) and organize their ritual space in a different way (compare Figs. 9-2

and 9-3). To insiders of Ukrainian culture, the design of RUNVira space closely resembles that of Ukrainian Christian churches.

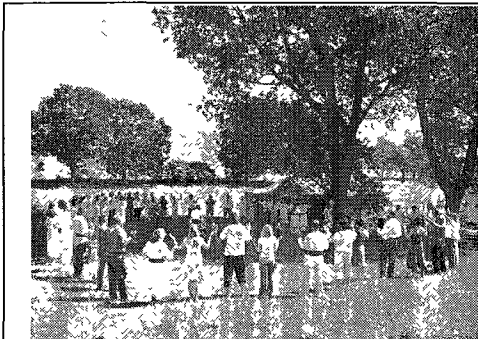


Figure 9 - 2. *Pravoslavlennia* [Glorifying *Prava*, the world of Gods] of Ancestral Fire. Village of Rashtivtsi, July 20, 2008.

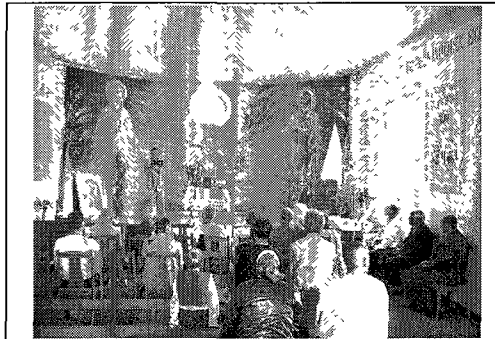


Figure 9 - 3. RUNtato Liubomyr conducts a Holy Hour of Self-Reflection service in the RUNvira Temple in Bohoiavlens'ke. Please note the organization of space.

One of the most distinct parts of the Orthodox church interior is the sanctuary, the consecrated area around the altar. The sanctuary separates the priest, who is the main celebrant of the service, from the congregation, clearly setting the boundary between the spiritual leader and the rest of the believers. It is the priest who has access to this most sacred area of the church and is invested with the authority to lead the service, while the congregation responds and reacts to his actions. This model of ritual form and behavior emphasizes the special authoritative position of the leader.⁵

RUNVira ritual space is organized in a similar way to that of Ukrainian Eastern Christian churches. The area surrounding the altar [жертвовник], where all the most important RUNVira attributes are placed, is reserved for the community leader (RUNtato or RUNmama). Thus, it is predominantly this leader who has

more immediate access to the sacred throughout the entire ritual. Although other representatives of the congregation can join the leader to assist him or her with particular tasks such as reading from *Maha Vira*, typically these tasks are performed by individuals who have RUNmama or RUNtato status. As in many Ukrainian Christian churches, the RUNVira congregation also plays a reactive role, observing the leader's actions and following their instructions. Again, this organization of space and division of roles, based on the pre-existing Eastern Christian model, symbolically reinforces the leader's authority and charisma.

Let us consider the ritual of name giving as practiced by the followers of Ancestral Fire. One particular ritual of name giving that I observed in the Ancestral Fire group took place in the context of the 2008 Perun's Regiment Cossack-sorcerers Camp [*Табір характерного козацтва "Перунів полк – 2008"*] in the village of Rashtivtsi, Ternopil' oblast'. Although the camp consisted predominantly of Ancestral Fire followers, there were also some individuals who did not officially belong to this community but who were determined to formally join Ancestral Fire. They arrived at the camp fully prepared for the ritual of name giving.

In addition to Supreme Volkhv Volodymyr, there were other leaders who were responsible for particular rituals and activities at the camp. Volkhv Bohumyr was in charge of a name-giving ceremony. One day, after the service of Glorifying Gods and Goddesses, Volkhv Bohumyr announced that he would later conduct the ritual of name-giving. He called everybody who was going to join the Ancestral Fire religious community to gather around him. First, he provided some

general explanation of the ceremony and instructions on how to participate in it. Then he had a private conversation with each person willing to receive a native name.

When all was ready, the converts-to-be formed a circle and set up a fire (Fig. 9-4). The entire ceremony was led by Volkhv Bohumyr. The core element of the ritual involved changing clothes. Each person was to take off his or her old



Figure 9 - 2. Name-giving ritual of Ancestral Fire of the Native Orthodox Faith conducted by Volkhv Bohumyr Mykolaiv. Rashtivtsi, July, 2008. New Ancestral Fire followers put on their new embroidered shirts as symbols of their new identities.

piece of clothing, throw it into the fire, and put on a new embroidered shirt, which had been prepared in advance. Prior to this, Volkhv Bohumyr had collected the new shirts and blessed them over the fire. This action symbolically signified the change of

identities. Interestingly, with new identity comes new authority.

While providing instructions before and during the ritual, Volkhv Bohumyr stressed his continuing role in the lives of the new Ancestral Fire adherents. From now on, he would be considered their *spiritual father* [духовний батько (Ukr.)], [духовный отец (Rus.)] and all further questions regarding either spiritual growth or any life matters should be addressed to him. Bohumyr repeatedly pointed out that the new followers are to call him *Father* [Батько

(Ukr.), [*Omeu* (Rus.)]. Interestingly, despite the fact that the form of this ritual does not resemble Eastern Christian services, the stress on the term *Father* is the same as in the well established Orthodox tradition. For many Ukrainians, this term is connected with Eastern Christian priests; the term *otets'* is used in regard to the priest in both Russian and Ukrainian and the term *batiushka* (diminutive of *bat'ko(a)*) is used officially in Russian and sometimes in Ukrainian on the popular level (especially in regards to the Orthodox priests of the Moscow Patriarchate). I had an interesting encounter with a lady from the village of Rashtivtsi who attended the camp out of curiosity. She was standing beside me observing this ritual. When Volkhv Bohumyr emphasized how he wanted to be addressed by his followers, she whispered to me in a joking way: "He is just like the *batiushka* in church."⁶

Again, we see how the leader's charisma becomes reinforced with the help of symbolic references to the familiar pre-existing model of spiritual authority. It is likely that the Christian models discussed above are unconsciously employed by contemporary Ukrainian Pagans. Considering their hostile attitudes to Christianity (especially in the case of RUNVira), it is doubtful that RUNtatos, RUNmamas or Volkhvy wish to be associated with Christian priests or Christianity in general.

b) (Re)constructing the Past on the Basis of the Present Sources

Many contemporary Ukrainian Pagans criticize Christian nationalization and "Ukrainianization" discussed above, describing it in terms of "a Ukrainian

form” that has been imparted with “foreign content.” Lev Sylenko express his concerns to his Christian counterparts in the following way:

The *pysanka* is yours, but it glorifies the event in Bethlehem rather than that in Kyiv. Children are yours but their souls have to be excited about and inspired by non-Ukrainian holy things and celebrations of Greek Orthodoxy [...]. (Sylenko 2005 [1998]: 798)

In response to this situation, contemporary Pagans also actively incorporate perceived old pagan rituals and artistic elements into their own cultural and religious activities, considering these as originally belonging to them. In addition, similar to Ukrainian Christians, Pagans use these elements as auxiliary instruments for promoting and emphasizing their own Ukrainianness. Interestingly, however, those items and practices that Pagans try to appropriate and cleanse of Christian influences have been transformed in terms of their forms and meanings over time. They have become widely associated with Ukrainian Christian traditions.

The very limited amount of primary information about old Slavic paganism leaves contemporary Ukrainian Pagans with a very small number of “real” pagan elements to revive. For example, it is unknown what *pysanky* looked like a thousand years ago. It is not even known whether or not they existed at that time. The first ethnographic accounts of the *pysanka* tradition are dated only as far back as the late 19th century. On the basis of these findings, which clearly indicate that this tradition was firmly established by the late 19th century, we may hypothesize that it originated long before this date. However, we cannot trace exactly how long ago – a century or several millennia.

As a result, Ukrainian Pagans adapt those forms of traditional folkloric elements that are available today. This situation can be defined as *Paganization*, following Kaplan's theoretical framework. Similar to *Christianization* in the African context, *Paganization* refers to the situation where Pagan versions of traditional practices (or those perceived as pagan but, obviously, incorporated by Christianity) are introduced. As Kaplan would put it, these traditional practices "bec[o]me of value to the development of a [Pagan] life in a [Pagan] community" (Kaplan 1995: 16).

For many Ukrainian Pagans, *Paganization* – developing Pagan versions of traditional (Christian) practices – implies "cleansing" those practices from "foreign" influences. This process is especially evocative in marriage rites performed by Native Faith community. Their leader, Volkhvynia Zoreslava, justifies these undertakings in the following way:

The Christian marriage ceremony borrowed from the pagan religion, because these rituals were developed by the people over millennia. On their own, they categorically could not develop anything new. Perhaps only that wreaths made of live flowers were replaced by metal crowns, and prayers were taken from the Bible – the holy writings of the Christian faith. Considering the nonsense of these, allow me to say, the "holy" writings that are read in churches, we can surely affirm that these are "sacred lies," which the church imposes upon its ignorant followers. The priests make the procession around the altar in a counter-clockwise direction! Ask anyone who was married in a Christian church if they remember what the priest said and if they know what the rituals mean? The majority of them exist in a sort of semi-conscious state, as if under hypnosis, blindly following this dead ritual and waiting until this unnatural activity comes to an end. (Lozko 2001: 24)⁷

Lozko criticizes Ukrainian Eastern Christianity for those things which are often criticized by Christians themselves, especially the younger generation. In contrast to western Protestantism that strives to provide comprehensive interpretations of the Bible by projecting them onto “real” life, many Ukrainian



Figure 9 - 3. Hnatiuk-Hykawy Ukrainian-Canadian Wedding. The wedding couple, crowned with gold crowns during the marriage ceremony in a Ukrainian church, process around the small altar [*tetrapod*] led by the priest. The couple's hands are tied by an embroidered ritual towel *rushnyk* and typically the priest, together with the couple, circumnavigates the *tetrapod* three times. This ritual signifies the first steps of married life. Photo A. Nahachewsky, Dauphin, MB, Canada, July 16, 1994. UF1994.038.p0119.

Christian Churches of the Byzantine Rite adhere to the ideas of ascetism and isolation from the “world.” It is quite typical in both Ukraine and the North American diaspora to hear young people complaining that they do not understand much in the services of traditional Ukrainian churches.⁸ More specific

elements of the Ukrainian Christian marriage addressed by Lozko are presented in Fig. 9-5.

Lozko strives to “cleanse” the Ukrainian Christian marriage ceremony (which she critically labels an “unnatural activity”) from Christian influences by introducing the Native Faith marriage “in the style of our Ancestors” [*за звичаєм Предків*].

Lozko describes this ritual in detail in the Native Faith periodical *Svaroh* (see Lozko 2001b: 24-25).

Instead of metal crowns, Native Faith couples wear wreaths made out of live flowers on their wedding day. The marriage ritual is conducted by the Volkhvynia, who meets the couple near a

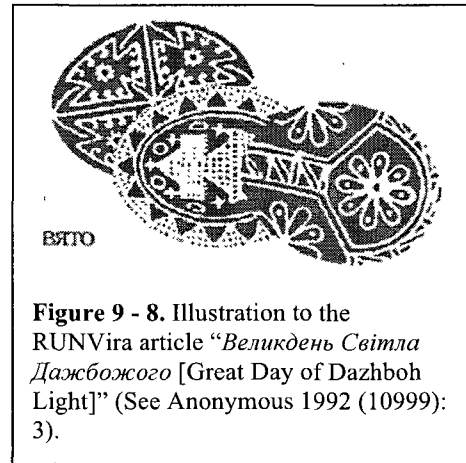
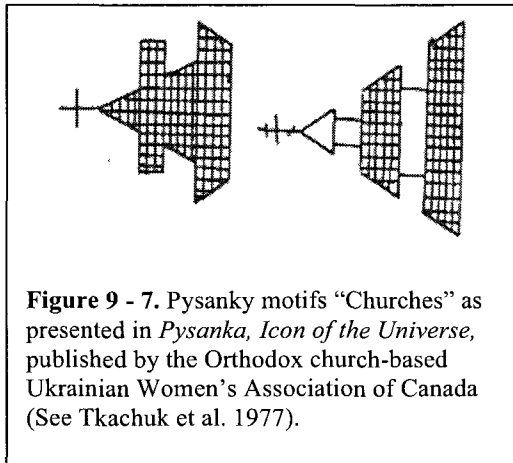


Figure 9 - 4. Volkhvynia Zoreslava conducts the ritual of marriage. Everybody is wearing modern pieces of clothing designed on the basis of folk (village) motifs. The bride and groom's hands are tied with an embroidered *rushnyk*. Holding the ends of the *rushnyk*, the Volkhvynia is leading the couple around a lime-tree. From *Svaroh* 11-12, 2001: back inside cover.

sacred linden-tree [священне дерево липа]. The culmination of this ritual is the circumnavigation of the linden-tree three times (Fig. 9-6). First, the bride's mother ties the bride's and groom's hands with an embroidered ritual towel *rushnyk*. Then the Volkhvynia takes the ends of the *rushnyk* and leads the couple three times around the sacred tree chanting the following: "We do not go alone -/ Svaroh leads us,/ Mother Lada follows,/ and we follow them with our Gods!"⁹

Lozko argues that such elements of wedding rituals as tying the couple's hands with a *rushnyk*, placing wreaths on their heads and walking around a linden-tree originate in pre-Christian times but Christianity eventually modified them. However, general insiders of Ukrainian culture would associate these ritual motifs with the Christian tradition. Lozko undoubtedly also sees this resemblance. On the one hand, by claiming that certain elements in Christian churches

originally belonged to the ancestors of contemporary Pagans, she strives to legitimize her actions as exclusively Pagan. On the other hand, this resemblance refers to something familiar, facilitating the process of adaptation to Paganism.



One more example is especially evocative. It represents an illustration to a RUNVira article entitled “*Velykden'* [Great Day] of Dazhboh Light” published in the periodical *Samobutnia Ukraina-Rus'* [Unique Ukraine-Rus'] (Fig.9-8). This work discusses old pagan rituals performed on the territory of Ukraine in the context of the celebration of solstice and the return of spring. The author discusses *pysanky* as a significant attribute of this ancient holiday.

Interestingly, while the designs of the two *pysanky* on the left and on the right are based on abstract geometric and floral motifs, the *pysanka* in the middle includes a stylized image of a Christian church. One can find this element on the Easter eggs of the Hutsul ethnographic region in western Ukraine. These motifs include the type of wooden church architecture specifically characteristic of this

area (Fig. 9-7), suggesting that *pysanky* depicting church architecture could not have appeared earlier than the actual churches.

c) *Incorporating Non-Ukrainian Elements: Adapting to New Contexts*



Figure 9- 5. Natalia Swrydenko’s wedding, 1991. RUNtato Boholiub wearing a *sviadana* conducts the ritual of marriage. A large white candle is placed on the altar table along with the sacred RUNVira attributes: *Znamennia Dazhbozhe* [Dazhboh Sign], *Maha Vira* and others.

Natalia Swrydenko, an American citizen of Ukrainian descent currently living in the state of New York, was very nervous before her wedding in 1991. She wanted her father (RUNtato Boholiub) to perform the marriage in the RUNVira style. However, she also wanted the ceremony to be understood by their American guests, many of whom did not have any Ukrainian/RUNVira background. That is why Natalia consciously combined RUNVira elements with those of American urban folklore and popular culture. For

example, a large candle, an element of the American wedding tradition, was placed on the RUNVira altar along with sacred RUNVira items (Fig.9-9). It is supposed to be lit each year on the day of the wedding until the 50th anniversary of marriage.

This example shows that larger socio-political contexts bring their correctives into Ukrainian Paganism. Although Ukrainian Pagans, especially the followers of RUNVira, are strongly oriented towards Ukraine and things

Ukrainian, this combination of Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian elements in their rituals helps Ukrainian American representatives of this faith to reach out to larger community, making Ukrainian Paganism look more “natural” in the American setting.

d) Borrowing from Pagans: Authenticating Ukrainianness

The examples introduced above deal predominantly with situations, in which contemporary Pagans borrow motifs and ideas from other cultural and religious traditions. However, despite being a relatively new phenomenon, Paganism has already begun to spread its own influence on the wider Ukrainian society. In this respect, it supports Stewart and Shaw’s idea that cultural contact is two directional.

During the period of my research, I heard comments from some non-Pagans describing contemporary Pagan practices as “truly Ukrainian” and “authentic.” Some nationally conscious Ukrainians view Pagan rituals as having a close connection with those of the old Slavs. Thus, many nationally conscious Ukrainians see Pagan practices as valuable sources for identity formation, although they do not necessarily support the general idea of the revival of old paganism as a religion.

I witnessed an example at the festival *Kraina Mrii* [Dream Land] in 2008. For several years, *Kraina Mrii* has been organized annually in Kyiv by Oleh Skrypka, a famous Ukrainian musician. The festival is “all-Ukrainian” in nature and does not provide explicit reference to any religion. However, the event is very

patriotic in spirit. By supporting and popularizing traditional (old) genres of Ukrainian music, *Kraina Mrii* plays an important role in the raising of contemporary national consciousness through the aesthetics of old sounds. The festival is usually held at the time of “Christianized” Kupalo celebrations, around July 6-7.

Kupalo is an old ritual. As presented in discussions of the agrarian cycle rituals, Kupalo is a “pre-Christian celebration of the solstice and vegetation fertility magic” (Kononenko 2004: 179). At some point after the introduction of Christianity, Kupalo became associated with Ivan (John) the Baptist because the holiday of this Saint (July 7/June 24) falls very close to the solstice. This syncretic holiday became known as Ivan Kupalo, where the former part Ivan stands for the Christian Saint while the latter part Kupalo represents his pre-Christian counterpart.

One of the most colourful elements of pre-Soviet Ivan Kupalo celebration was organized by youth in the evening. Part of the ceremony involved constructing a figure called Kupalo or Marena. Sometimes both were created. Their “bodies” could be made out of small cut tree, a broom, or an effigy made of straw. It could be decorated with wreaths, necklaces, ribbons, and flowers. Girls would dance and sing around Marena while boys would attempt to steal her. At the end of the night, Marena and/or Kupalo would be either “drowned” or dismembered, while the bits would be spread across the fields, perhaps to ensure fertility of the crops (Chubinskii 1872b: 193-195; Kononenko 2004: 179).

Socially, this ritual was meant for youth to meet and form potential couples. In line with the themes of marriage and potential fertility, there were also many fortune telling and magic-related elements incorporated in this rite. For example, in some localities, girls of a marriageable age would make wreaths and attach candles to them. Then, they would light the candles and set the wreaths to float on a nearby body of water. The direction where one's wreath would flow indicated the direction from which she one expect her future husband. The culmination of this holiday was the setting of a bonfire. When the flames were of a lesser intensity, couples would hold hands and jump over the fire. It was believed that the couple whose hands remain connected while they leapt over the fire would stay together and soon be married (Chubinskii 1872b: 196; Kononenko 2004: 180).

During the Soviet period, the celebration of Kupalo was "sovietized." In line with Marxist ideology, both magical and religious (Christian) elements of this holiday were dismissed as remnants of backward thinking. Instead, the aesthetic and playful components of Kupalo were emphasized (Kuveniova et. al 1971: 182-9; Klymets 1990: 106-16). In 1959, The Day of Soviet Youth was introduced in the Soviet calendar. The celebrations of this day were largely based on old Kupalo rituals. However, in the Soviet context, the Kupalo bonfire came to represent goodness and eternal glory (of Soviet heroes). Instead of Kupalo and Marena, the effigies of the enemies of the Soviet ideology such as warmongers, bureaucrats, drunkards, and hooligans were burned in a bonfire (Kureniova 1971: 185-6).

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Kupalo has become one of the most popular rituals among post-Soviet revivalists in various contexts of Ukrainian society, beginning with rural settings and finishing with staged performances in urban centers. Associated with the distant past, it has become a powerful marker of Ukrainianess in the post-Soviet environment. As could be expected, Kupalo has also become one of the major holidays of the Pagan calendar cycle (Figs. 9-10 and 9-11).



Figure 9 - 6. Kupalo celebration by Ancestral Fire. Kyiv, Trukhaniv island, June 21, 2008. Adherents of the group sing Kupalo songs holding hands and walking in a circle. Effigies of Kupalo and Marena are set up in the middle.

On the first day of the 2008 *Kraina Mrii* festival, in the same city of Kyiv, representatives of Native Faith gathered at their shrine to conduct their weekly ritual of Glorifying Gods and Goddesses. During this ritual, they made references to Kupalo. Later that night, they were going to observe a special celebration of

this holiday as one of the major spiritual experiences in the yearly Svaroh's Cycle. Meanwhile, immediately after the ritual they were going to join the *Kraina Mrii* festival procession that was taking place near their shrine.

Many Ukrainian



Figure 9 - 7. The culmination moment: Volkvy of Ancestral Fire formed a circle within the circle of other believers and made a live fire.

Pagans were pleased by the way and especially by the time that the festival was organized that year. I was told by several representatives of Native Faith and two “independent” Pagans that it was their idea to convince Oleh Skrypka to stage *Kraina Mrii* (that itself planned to incorporate many Kupalo themes) on the day of summer solstice – June 21, when the ancestors of contemporary Ukrainians originally celebrated. Pagans strongly rejected the idea of having the festival around July 7, on the feast of Christian Ivan Kupalo, as was originally planned. Apparently, Skrypka was convinced and Native Faith Pagans happily joined his festival procession before beginning their own Kupalo celebrations. After the procession arrived at its destination point, the effigies of Kupalo and Marena were placed near the main stage of the festival. Guests and participants took pictures in front of them throughout the entire festival.

A representative of Native Faith shared his opinion about the *Kraina Mrii* festival. Before joining the festival procession on June 21, he told his fellow believers that he was very pleased with what Oleh Skrypka was doing. However, he was concerned that for the organizers and guests of *Kraina Mrii*, Kupalo was predominantly a “colourful theatrical performance,” rather than a “real spiritual experience,” as it was for contemporary Pagans. Despite this fact, in his opinion, it was a good start. He expressed hope that maybe through “theatrical performance”



Figure 9 - 8. While the procession is getting ready to begin, participants and guests of the festival have a chance to take photographs with two colourful “fake” male “pagan” characters standing in front of the effigies of Kupalo and Marena. These characters wear Kupalo wreaths made out of plants and hold a torch with the symbolic Kupalo fire.



Figure 9 - 9. *Kraina Mrii* festival organizers prepare for the festival to begin with a ritualistic procession. The truck carrying the effigies of Kupalo and Marena will form part of this ceremony.

many Ukrainians would come to a “real spiritual experience.” At least one step in that direction had already been made. The *Kraina Mrii* festival would now be celebrated at the summer solstice, the same day Kupalo was originally observed by the ancestors of contemporary Ukrainians. Pagans encouraged this change.

Syncretism related to Kupalo includes several layers. This holiday, believed to have pagan origins, was mixed with Christian ideas, with romantic nationalist sentiments, and with Soviet connotations. It is now imparted with Pagan content, including the time of its celebration. In this form it reached the larger circle of (non-Pagan) Ukrainian patriots, whose visions often coincide with those of Pagans. Both groups, in line with romantic nationalist ideology, use old pagan practices as instruments for the construction of a “true” national identity. Unlike the Soviets who tried to de-sacralise this ritual, Ukrainian Pagans actively strive to revive its perceived ancient sacred and magical meaning. However, Soviet and Pagan sentiments regarding specifically Christian elements of Kupalo coincided as well. The followers of both ideologies actively attempt to dismiss the Christian elements of Kupalo. This is intriguing, especially considering that the two systems are ideologically opposed.

The Kupalo ritual as (re)created by Bohdan Ostrovs’kyi, a Kyiv-based leader of RUNVira, is especially interesting.¹⁰ In the area where Bohdan Ostrovs’kyi was born (the Ternopil’ region, western Ukraine) Kupalo was not celebrated. However, since this holiday is very well known in the rest of Ukraine and became widely recognized after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ostrovs’kyi decided to include it into his RUNVira calendar. However, he was not fully satisfied with certain parts of Kupalo. In his opinion, this ritual included many obscene themes such as, for instance, young men and ladies swimming together “half-naked,” that Ostrovs’kyi found immoral. While pondering how to organize this holiday for his community, he reviewed some literature and encountered the

theme of the *vinchannia prabat'kiv* [marriage of foreparents]. Since the wreath is an essential component of both Kupalo and marriage rituals as well as a symbol of female virginity in Ukrainian folklore, Ostrovs'kyi linked it to the idea of "marriage of foreparents."

On the day of Kupalo, young females in Ostrovs'kyi's community make wreaths and have them blessed. While blessing the wreaths, Ostrovs'kyi says: "To be blessed with purity and fidelity" [*Чистотою і вірністю освячується*] implying that the girls are obliged to take their wreaths home and keep them as reminders to preserve their purity until marriage and then remain faithful to their husbands for the rest of their lives. Ostrovs'kyi frames this ritual as a "commandment of their foreparents."

This leader recalls how one year he was invited to conduct his Kupalo ritual for general public in a particular area of Kyiv. Approximately three hundred people gathered to watch the ceremony. According to Ostrovs'kyi, they became especially enthusiastic when it came to the moment of blessing the wreaths. Those who did not have wreaths began to make them from plants growing in the area. In this context, Ostrovs'kyi was approached by an elderly woman who had tears in her eyes and a wreath in her hands. The woman said: "Please forgive me, I am an old and stupid woman. I never realized that we (Ukrainians) bless wreaths. I want to die knowing that I had my wreath blessed." She put the wreath on her head for Ostrovs'kyi to bless. He understood that the woman meant that at the time she was getting married she was pure but did not have a blessed wreath.

This example illustrates how a Pagan leader creatively reworked traditional Kupalo practices in terms of their forms and meanings, projecting his own philosophy and moral convictions onto them. His version of Kupalo is apparently well received by his followers. Moreover, it was introduced to the larger public who, in the post-Soviet context of the rise of national consciousness, took interest in it as a “purely” traditional Ukrainian cultural form.

Ukrainian Pagans do not only borrow old folkloric forms from their original peasant contexts but also (re)create these forms. The (re)created practices, in turn, find their way back to the people. This mode of adaptation that deals with constant mutual exchange of religious elements that, in turn, are seen beneficial by all cultures in contact can be called *reciprocity*, to expand on Kaplan’s theoretical framework.

Belief Systems

As discussed above, with the exception of some recent theoretical ideas, many scholars identify the present-day situation in Ukrainian popular Christianity as *dvoievir’ia* [dual faith] that incorporates both Christian and pre-Christian elements. Ukrainian Pagans strive to reverse this and return to what they believe is the original *odnovir’ia* [single belief system]. However, the results can be defined as *bahatovir’ia* [multiple belief system] that represents a syncretic conglomeration of old paganism, popular and official Christianity, non-Ukrainian elements and Pagan ideas.

Perspectives

To conclude the discussion of syncretism in contemporary Ukrainian Paganism, it is worthwhile to reemphasize the importance of one's perspective addressed at the beginning of this chapter. While "deconstructing" Ukrainian Pagan beliefs and practices in order to better understand the complexity of these phenomena, I view them as syncretic, from an *etic* (academic) perspective. Ukrainian Pagans do not consider their views and practices as such. On the contrary, they adhere to the idea of "anti-syncretism" introduced and defined by Stewart and Shaw in the following way:

[Anti-syncretism is] the antagonism to religious synthesis shown by agents concerned with the defense of religious boundaries. Anti-syncretism is frequently bound up with the construction of 'authenticity,' which is in turn often linked to notions of 'purity.' (Stewart and Shaw 1994: 7)

To the adherents of the concept of "anti-syncretism," "syncretism is associated with "inauthenticity" or "contamination." In fact, "syncretism" is often defined in contrast to such terms as "purity" and "authenticity" (Stewart and Shaw 2004 [1994]: 1-2).

My understanding of "authenticity" is different from that of most contemporary Ukrainian Pagans. It coincides with that of Stewart and Shaw, who define it in the following way:

...'authenticity' and 'originality' do not necessarily depend on purity. They are claimable as 'uniqueness,' and both pure and mixed traditions can be unique. What makes them 'authentic' and valuable is a separate issue, a discursive matter involving power, rhetoric and persuasion. Thus both putatively pure *and* putatively syncretic traditions can be 'authentic' if people claim that these traditions are unique, and uniquely their (historical) possession. It could be

argued, in fact, that syncretic blends are more unique because historically unrepeatable (Stewart and Shaw 2004 [1994] 6-7)

¹ As, for example, illustrated by a church script of the 11-12th centuries entitled *Pouchenna* quoted in Humenna 1978 206

² For a discussion of national and religious awakening in late Soviet and post-Soviet Ukraine, see Wanner 2007 130-31 For a discussion of the historical role of Ukrainian churches in the Ukrainian diaspora in Canada, see Martynowych 1985 170-200 For a particular case study of a Ukrainian Catholic church and its role in an early Ukrainian Canadian community in East Central Alberta, see A Makuch 1989, especially pp 75-93, devoted to this community's calendar cycle and life cycle celebrations and observances

³ The English translation is taken from Bible 1991

⁴ This idea is inspired by anthropologist Jean DeBernardi In her article on contemporary pilgrimages to and events at the Wudang Mountain site in south-central China, DeBernardi discusses the modernization of Daoism, distinguishing between what she calls traditional and modern or sacred and secular forms of charisma in their relationship to space She illustrates how these two forms of charisma coexist and communicate with each other in the present-day context (DeBernardi 2008)

⁵ This model of ritual was also observed by Stanley Tambiah in his analysis of the annual religious rite of changing the clothes of the Emerald Buddha in contemporary Thailand (Tambiah 1985 336-8) Only the Thai king may perform this ritual inside his palace and, thus, the only one who has access to the sacred The public, who know exactly when the ritual is taking place, can "participate" in the ceremony "behind closed doors," namely, behind the fence of the king's palace

⁶ Він так, як батюшка в церкві

⁷ Вінчання християни запозичили з язичницької релігії, бо ці обряди вироблені народом протягом цілих тисячоліть Самі ж вони нічого принципово нового створити не змогли Хіба що вінки з живих рослин замінили металевими коронами, а молитви взяли з Біблії – святого писання християнських конфесій Зважаючи на нісенітницю цього, з дозволу сказати, "святого" писання, яке читається в церквах, можемо впевнено стверджувати, що такими ж є і "священні узи", які церква накладає на своїх нерозумних сповідників Обхід навколо вівтаря попи здійснюють проти Сонця! Спитайте когось із обвинувачених у християнській церкві, чи пам'ятають вони, про що читав пп, і чи знають вони, що означає сам ритуал? Переважна більшість перебувають у якомусь напівсонному стані і, як під гіпнозом, тупо виконують цей заупокійний чин, чекаючи, коли ж усе це неприродне дійство скінчиться

⁸ In Canada, I often heard these complaints from my students of Ukrainian background

⁹ "Не самі йдемо -/Сварог нас веде,/Мати Лада слідом іде,/а ми за ними з Богами своїми!"

¹⁰ The following description is based on my recorded interview with Bohdan Ostrovs'kyi on June 29, 2008

CHAPTER X:

In Spite of Politics:

Aesthetics and Beauty in Ukrainian Paganism

Nationalist and pro-racist politics receive the greatest amount of attention from scholars of Slavic Paganisms, largely because of methodological reasons. Academics researching these movements focus predominantly on the “authoritative discourse” namely, the voices of Pagan leaders as presented in their books, periodicals and websites.¹ These sources indeed devote much attention to the anti-colonial, racist and anti-Semitic sentiments of many Slavic Pagans. However, ethnographic research reveals many other important aspects. One of these aspects is Pagan aesthetics.

When I asked Volkhvynia Zoreslava what inspired her to accept Paganism as a form of spirituality, she emphasized the great role of patriotism to Ukraine. However, while enthusiastically stressing that Ukrainian Paganism contributes to the strengthening of national consciousness, she was no less enthusiastic about the beauty of the practices revived by contemporary Pagans: “[...] all this beauty of our Ukrainian rituals, all these embroidered cloths, wreaths, all these objects reflecting nature and human life and culture, together they create such a beautiful world [...]” (Lozko, May 23, 2007).²

Zlatana, a 21-year old adherent of Ancestral Fire from Odesa, shared her experience. She first heard about Ukrainian Paganism from her friends. The fact that people gather in nature [*на природі*] and pray to their Gods seemed like a *fairy tale* [*казка*] to her. She began to express some interest in the movement.

However, she did not have a clear understanding of Pagan spirituality until she met Pagan singer and composer Zhyvosyl Liutyi in Kyiv in 2006. It was specifically the aesthetics of Zhyvosyl's sounds that led Zlatana to full conversion to Paganism.³

He was the first who told me everything about it [Paganism]. He sang his songs for me. Something touched me. He began to sing and play his *bandura*, and something special was awakened in my soul. I felt something native [рідне]. At that time, I did not know my native language and native culture very well. I was very distant from them. It was because I was from Odesa, and in Odesa this is not wide spread. There are many more Russian-speakers and Russian patriots. Then I met Zhyvosyl, and had such an admiration – a person looking for his nature, for his roots. (Zlatana, April 24, 2007)⁴

This statement is especially powerful since it shows how the aesthetics of sound markedly changed Zlatana's worldview. She now identifies the culture that she discovered within Paganism with the help of Zhyvosyl Liutyi, and not the culture that she was raised in, as *native* [рідна] to her.

Anton Lubii, a Native Faith adherent in his middle twenties, is a sculptor and a recent graduate of the L'viv National Academy of Arts. According to him, it was art that brought him to Paganism [мене мистецтво до цього привело]. He became fascinated with archeological cultures and the symbolism of various objects and motifs associated with old traditions:

It is not because I am a Pagan and feel like I should create only Pagan images. No, I am genuinely interested in creating them. The images of Perun and Veles are inexhaustible for me. I make them however I choose. One can create many images [of these Gods].⁵

What unites all these narratives is their authors' fascination with Pagan aesthetics.

Although communicated less extensively and openly than politics,

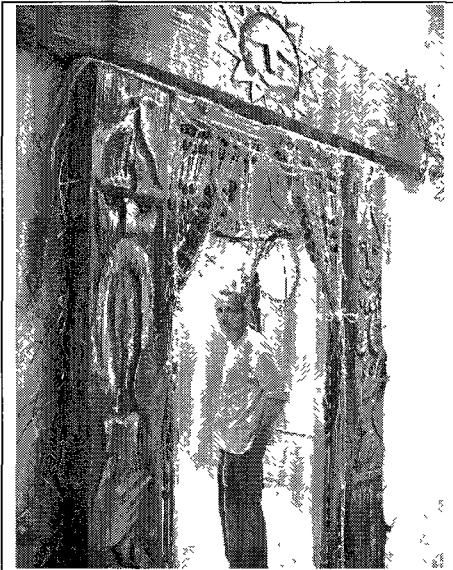


Figure 10 - 1. Anton Lubii standing in the doorway to his workshop “Grandfather’s Beard” [Дідова борода] in Briukhovychi, L’viv oblast’. Since Veles is believed to be the patron of Arts, Anton decided to give this name to his workshop. The door is framed with decorative compositions representing the spiritual beings and solar symbols of old Slavic mythology. August, 2008.

aesthetics are a very important component of contemporary Ukrainian Paganism. Art cannot be completely separated from politics though, since Pagan ideas of beauty are closely connected with and driven by political sentiments. For Ukrainian Pagans, the expression of their national identity is associated with aesthetically pleasing images. In other words, to them Ukrainianness is strongly connected with visual beauty as expressed through clothing, ritual attributes, visual images and music.

Folk Art: Costume

a) Dress and Nudity

Dress is very important for Ukrainian Pagans. Unlike some of their Western counterparts, Ukrainian Pagans do not worship nude. Sabina Magliocco finds that while the majority of American Pagans “wear some sort of clothing,” for some,

especially Wiccans, “nudity itself becomes a form of costuming” (Magliocco 2001: 55). Those who worship nude, do it in narrow circles rather than during large-scale gatherings:

For practitioners, it is a powerful expression of the body and its essential sacredness, in direct opposition to Western culture, in which nudity (frequently equated with sexuality) and sacredness are thought of as being the opposite poles. For Gardnerian Witches, nakedness is a symbol of openness and vulnerability before the deities and each other; the naked body is sexual, but not *only* sexual, and sexuality is an expression of the sacred polarity that underlies all life in the universe [emphasis - SM]. Nakedness also removes class differences among participants, itself a form of social critique, and creates a strong sense of intimacy. Coveners who worship naked see each other at their most vulnerable, yet no one leers, stares, or comments; participants are in safe, sacred space. This contributes to the sense of “perfect love and perfect trust” which Wiccans say ideally should prevail in a coven. (Magliocco 2001: 55)

The contrast between Western and Ukrainian practices in their relationship to dress and nudity can be explained in terms of some major principles and values around which the two forms of Paganism have developed. Western Paganism represents a mode of resistance to many social conventions. Pagan nudity, in particular, is a statement rejecting what is perceived as socially and visually “normal” in Western societies. For Ukrainian Pagans, social conventions represent a minor concern, if any. This movement focuses specifically on the formation of a unique national identity rather than struggles against established societal norms. In other words, while the goal of many Western Pagans is to find social freedom and harmony with nature, the majority of their Ukrainian counterparts are predominantly concerned about being “truly” Ukrainian or Slavic. Nudity, in addition to stripping people of class differences, also often

removes the markers of ethnic belonging (Magliocco 2001: 55). This is not an effect that Ukrainian Pagans strive to achieve; by giving up their costumes they would lose one of their most distinct markers of Ukrainianness.

Moreover, while Western Pagans reject formal leadership, and nudity helps them to promote equality between all the practitioners, Ukrainian Pagans promote hierarchy. As will be illustrated below, dress often becomes a marker of the special position of leaders within their communities.

Furthermore, Western and Ukrainian Paganisms have developed in two different social contexts, with dissimilar attitudes to nudity and beauty. In Western societies, especially in multicultural settings, individuals learn to tolerate the other. Accordingly, many Western Pagans promote acceptance regardless of physical appearance. The situation is different in the Ukrainian context, where tolerance for the other is not a part of mainstream ideology. The idea of pleasant physical appearance as an expression of a unique identity dominates over that of acceptance. The naked body is not always beautiful. By avoiding nakedness in their rituals, Ukrainian Pagans avoid having to tolerate unpleasant looking bodies.

b) Folk Costume in Ukrainian Society: From Peasant Dress to Urban Fashion

Among the nationally conscious Ukrainian intelligentsia, interest in folk costume constitutes part of a general fascination with peasant culture, a fascination that has its roots in the 19th century. Ukrainian folk costume made its way from peasant contexts into urban settings because of the significant role of this mode of dress in the building of a national identity.

Although the Ukrainian urban intelligentsia began to express interest in folk costume in the 19th century, this interest has become especially pronounced during the post-Soviet era. As a distinct marker of national identity, folk costume has become closely incorporated into nationalist politics. What was originally referred to as “folk clothing” is now charged with a political connotation and is widely regarded as “national costume.”

The style called *fol'k* [фольк] has occupied a prominent niche in contemporary Ukrainian urban fashion. Dress of this style involves various

degrees of improvisation, from very close replication of particular regional folk costumes to the incorporation of only selected motifs from these costumes into modern attire. Often highly stylized, these elements may only slightly resemble original traditional folk dress.

The *fol'k* style is popular among prominent present-day political figures. For example, in 2007, former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko appeared at the general meeting of her political party “Block Yulii Tymoshenko” in a costume based on motifs from the Iavoriv region of the L’viv oblast’. Although modernized, Tymoshenko’s dress closely resembles the traditional folk costume of this ethnographic area (compare Figs. 10-2 and 10-3).



Figure 10 - 2.
Traditional (holiday)
female costume of
Iavorivshchyna
Photo from Bilan and
Stel'mashchuk 2001
201



Figure 10 - 3. Yulia Tymoshenko at the general meeting of her political party. Photo by Dmytro Amidov (Gudzyk 2007).



Figure 10 - 4. Kateryna Yushchenko (right) at the celebration of the 750th anniversary of L'viv. Photo by Anna Andriievs'ka and press service of *Nasha Ukraina* (Our Ukraine) (Anonymous 2006).

Kateryna Yushchenko, the spouse of the former President of Ukraine Victor Yushchenko, arrived to the celebration of the 750th anniversary of the city of L'viv dressed in evening attire that was also inspired by traditional folk clothing. Her costume included a burgundy blouse with embroidered appliques on white background (Fig. 10-4). The embroidered motifs are highly stylized and the blouse only vaguely resembles traditional women's shirts. For both Yulia Tymoshenko and Kateryna Yushchenko, their dress is a means of expression of their sense of belonging to the Ukrainian nation. Men's attire based on folk costume is usually more modest and limited to embroidered shirts that are worn

with the classic business suit. A more casual style features the combination of embroidered shirt with jeans.

All these examples illustrate how peasant aesthetics have become incorporated into contemporary urban fashion. In its original context, folk clothing performed its typical functions: protecting from cold; marking normalcy, age, gender, status; communicating beauty, among others. In addition, folk clothing served as a marker for particular ethnographic territories (Kononenko and Lesiv, forthcoming), at least to insiders familiar with the material culture of various regions. In the context of the construction of a national identity, because folk clothing is identified with a certain place, it has become a national symbol. Moreover, as utilized by some members of the Ukrainian elite, folk clothing acquires a new status. It is now not only beautiful but also prestigious to wear what some may have previously associated with underdog peasant status.

c) Pagan Views of Folk Costume: Sacred Meaning

Costume is a significant component of Ukrainian Pagan events. It is usually the physical appearances of Pagans that immediately draw outsiders' attention. Like many of their nationally conscious fellow Ukrainians, Pagans are greatly inspired by traditional folk costume. In terms of its visual form, the Pagan dress style overlaps with that of other nationally conscious Ukrainians. For example, one can often see Pagans wearing embroidered shirts in combination with jeans or business suits. In their costumes, one can also trace various degrees of improvisation and manipulation of original folk motifs.

In terms of its meaning, Pagan clothing differs from that of other Ukrainians. Like many other nationally conscious Ukrainians inspired by 19th century romantic views of folklore and the mythological school of folklore studies, Pagans actively interpret the “primordial” symbolism of folk costumes and particular embroidery motifs. However, unlike others who are merely fascinated with the imagined culture of the past, Pagans actively try to incorporate these interpretations into their present day spirituality. They recognize various elements of embroidery as meaningful protective symbols. Unlike other nationally conscious Ukrainians who agree that such symbols represent the rich ancestral traditions of the past, many Ukrainian Pagans believe that these talismans “work” in the present.

In May, 2008, I had an interesting encounter at a weekly sacred service of the L’viv-based members of Native Faith. Lada, a female Pagan in her sixties, was wearing a richly embroidered shirt that attracted my attention (Fig. 10-5). When I enquired about the shirt, Lada shared the following story. She reproduced this pattern based on one she had found in the 1970s in *Radians’ka zhinka* [Soviet Woman], a widely-known Soviet periodical. She mentioned that a couple of years ago, when she had been participating in the annual Pagan *khoda* (procession) in Kyiv, she noticed that one individual could not take his eyes off her shirt. Later, this person approached Lada and said that he could not even imagine the kind of protection she had embroidered on her shirt. He suggested that these motifs (flowers and crosses) were indeed very powerful talismans created by the

ancestors of contemporary Ukrainians. Lada is now very proud of the profound symbolism of her shirt.

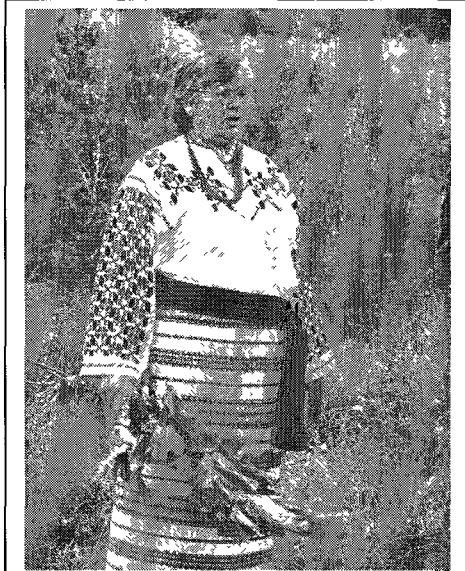


Figure 10 - 5. Lada in her embroidered shirt. Photo Taras Lesiv.

The design on this shirt does not represent a traditional pattern. It was, apparently, created by a professional artist on the basis of folk embroidery. During the Soviet era, folk-inspired embroidery was actively adapted by urban fashion industries but was perceived exclusively in aesthetic terms. In line with the Soviet secularist and materialist ideology, any magical and religious interpretations of particular motifs would not have been

tolerated.⁶ Although Lada reproduced this Ukrainian Soviet design in the 1970s, now, several decades later, with the help of her fellow Pagan acquaintance, she imparts it with new meaning. The formalistically beautiful Soviet pattern has found its way into contemporary Pagan aesthetics. Today the shirt is perceived as aesthetically pleasing not only because of its beautiful form but also because it is ideologically attractive (tied to ancient ancestral traditions) and spiritually meaningful (connected with beliefs in magical protection).

Volodymyr Kurovs'kyi provided another example showing the transformation of old peasant embroidery in contemporary Paganism. At one of the Ancestral Fire events, I asked Kurovs'kyi about the symbolism of the

embroidery on his shirt. He said that each element was a manifestation of a certain God. If one wants to reinforce one's particular qualities at a certain period of the day, one puts on a certain shirt. However, Kurovs'kyi stresses that particular symbols can "work" only if they are embroidered by hand. Like many other of his fellow Pagans, he strongly disapproves of machine embroidery that has recently become popular in Ukraine. To Pagans, such embroidery spoils the ancestral tradition and loses its real spiritual power.

d) Pagan Dress and Status

The male dress of Ancestral Fire followers is unique and not characteristic for other Pagan groups. The general style/cut of this attire is inspired by the male folk costume from a number of ethnographic regions of Ukraine: a long white embroidered shirt is worn on top of (white) narrow pants, with a belt tied around the waist (Fig. 10-7). The most striking aspect of Ancestral Fire costumes is the size and quantity of the embroidery. Anyone familiar with traditional Ukrainian folk costume would immediately notice the great amount of embroidery (especially around the chest area), not characteristic for traditional men's shirts. The visual effect of the richness of embroidery is achieved with the help of complex compositions created from traditional motifs. To reinforce this effect, the motifs are often greatly enlarged (compare the male shirts in Figs. 10-6 and 10-7).

By enlarging traditional embroidery designs, these Ukrainian Pagans reemphasize their devotion to ancestral traditions and thus, their "super" Ukrainianness.

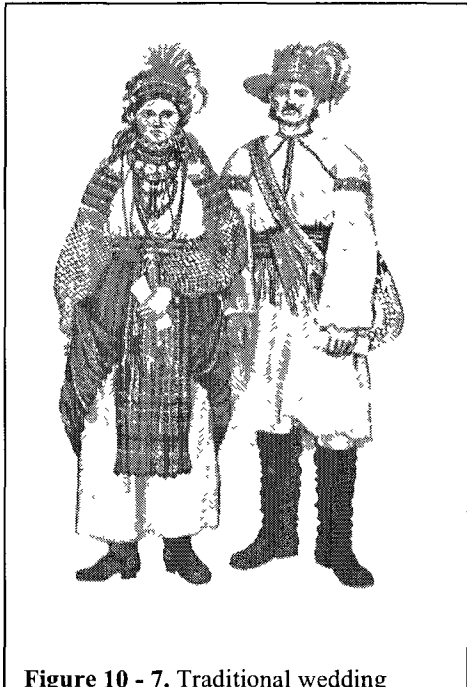


Figure 10 - 7. Traditional wedding costumes of the Pokuttia region. Please note that the amount of embroidery on the men's shirt is relatively modest even despite the fact that this is wedding attire. Photo from Kosmina 1989.



Figure 10-6. R to L: Volkhvy Iarovyt, Bohumyr and Volodymyr at the celebration of the Perun holiday in the village of Rashtivtsi, Ternopil' oblast', on July 20, 2008.

It is usually the Ancestral Fire leaders who wear richly embroidered and aesthetically striking costumes during ritual occasions. Regular followers of this branch of Ukrainian Paganism dress in a more modest way. Don Yoder, while commenting on the functions of costume, points out that “the costume is distinct and identifiable; it identifies the wearer to the outside world as well as to his own community...” (Yoder 1972: 295). Anthropologist Edmund Leach presents a similar argument on the role of dress in social communication in the context of ritual:

It is characteristic of all kinds of ritual occasions that all participants adopt special forms of dress, which emphasize in an exaggerated way the formal social

distinctions that separate one individual from another. Thus, ritual serves to remind the congregation just where each member stands in relation to every other and in relation to a larger system. (Leach 2002 [1968]: 119)

The above-described costumes emphasize their wearers' status, distinguishing the leaders from the regular members of Ancestral Fire.

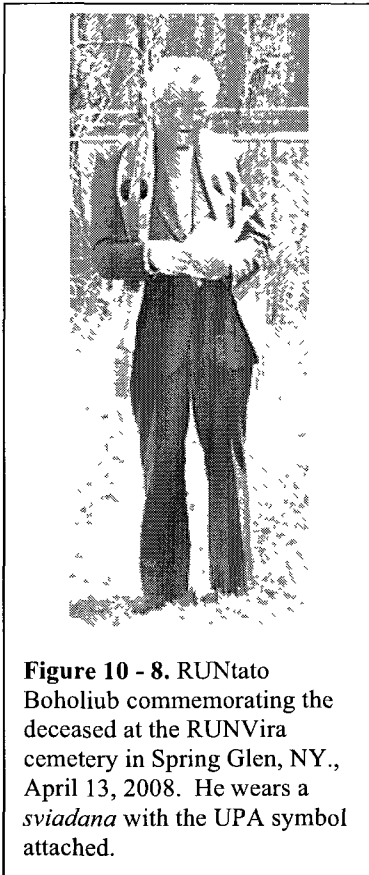


Figure 10 - 8. RUNtato Boholiub commemorating the deceased at the RUNVira cemetery in Spring Glen, NY., April 13, 2008. He wears a *sviadana* with the UPA symbol attached.

Similar tendencies related to dress and leadership can be seen in RUNvira communities in both Ukraine and the Ukrainian diaspora. For example, only a RUNtato or RUNmama wears a *sviadana*, long narrow ribbons made of blue and yellow fabric (the colours of the Ukrainian state flag) that are draped around the neck during rituals. The RUNVira *sviadana* resembles the stole [*енітрахиль*] worn by Orthodox and Catholic Christian priests. Some *sviadan*s have appliqués with the symbolic black and red colours of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army UPA (Fig.10-8).

e) *Different Dresses – Different Worldviews*

Ritual clothing communicates differences in worldview between various Pagan groups. For example, RUNVira followers focus on modern Ukrainian history such as the role of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army UPA. The red and black colours on RUNVira *sviadan*s indicate the strong nationalist orientation of this branch of Ukrainian Paganism. In contrast, Ancestral Fire leaders, by designing

their costumes on the basis of peasant dress motifs viewed as remnants of ancient culture, emphasize their connection with ancestral “prehistory.” Thus, while *political aesthetics* dominate in the case of RUNVira clothing, *spiritual aesthetics* are more pronounced in Ancestral Fire attire.

Furthermore, RUNVira RUNtatos wear embroidered shirts predominantly in combination with a regular business suit. Because this general style of suit originated in Western Europe (England), in Ukraine this type of dress is often called a *European suit* [європейський костюм].

This particular difference between RUNVira and Ancestral Fire attires lies in the broader ideologies of the two groups. Ancestral Fire is oriented towards the “authenticity” of ancestral traditions. Thus, its leaders want their clothing to look as distantly removed from contemporary Ukrainian everyday dress as possible and to resemble that of their ancestors. In contrast, RUNVira followers consciously reconstruct ancestral beliefs and practices, adapting them to their new realities. To them, contemporary Ukrainians are progressive descendants of their ancestors. By adding some old flavour – embroidered shirts – to their contemporary dress, RUNVira followers value the traditions of their forefathers. However, by wearing their embroidered shirts predominantly in combination with European business suits, they clearly communicate their orientation towards the future that they associate with Europeaness and progress.

f) “Ancient” Meaning through Modern Means

In contrast to their future-oriented RUNVira counterparts, Ancestral Fire adherents focus on the past, though they often emphasize their connection to ancient times with the help of modern means. I encountered a striking example of this at the Ancestral Fire camp in Rashtivtsi in July of 2008. During an interview with Volodymyr Kurovs’kyi’s sister Bozhena, my attention was drawn to her fingernails (Fig. 10-9). I was impressed by the way they were painted. On top of a background of transparent nail polish, various elements visually resembling Ukrainian embroidery motifs were applied with the help of black, red, and white nail polishes. When asked about her nails, Bozhena described two motifs in detail and then shared the story behind this art project.



On the forefinger of her right hand was the symbol of *Berehynia*.⁷ Bozhena interpreted this symbol as a woman raising her hands up to heaven and asking the Gods to bless and expand her family. The symbol of *alaty* was depicted on the nail of the third finger of her left hand. Bozhena’s nails were not natural, but artificial. She had a medical problem that affected her own nails. In

this artistic way, she treated them with the help of folk motifs that are perceived to have healing power.

For Bozhena (as for many of her fellow Pagans), the idea of magical healing is rooted in ancient agricultural traditions whose remnants can be traced to Ukrainian peasant contexts. However, these perceived symbols of the past are communicated in terms of modern urban fashion and aesthetic tendencies. One can hardly imagine a peasant woman, either in the past or today, with nails such as these. This fashion would interfere with any agricultural labour. Moreover, Bozhena does not heal her nails with the help of herbs or diet but by applying plastic paint.

g) Costume and Situational Identity

Pagan identity as expressed through costumes is situational in character. In everyday life, many Ukrainian Pagans are indistinguishable from their fellow Ukrainians. It is usually for special occasions and during sacred ceremonies that Pagans dress in their distinct costumes. I often observed people arriving at a place of worship in regular clothing and then changing into their Pagan attire.

This situational identity as expressed via clothing can be explained by several factors. Firstly, some people are fearful of disclosing their spiritualities since Paganism is marginalized. While an embroidered shirt alone would look “normal” on the streets of Ukrainian cities, richly decorated costumes and jewelry would be perceived by outsiders as “unusual.” To Zhrytsia Iaryna, the leader of a L’viv-based Native Faith community, this fear was the reason she chose a site in

the *Znesinnia Park*, situated far from the crowded parts of L'viv, as the place for her group's gatherings.

Secondly, Ukrainian Pagans seem to clearly distinguish between the sacred and the secular. Pagan clothing adds a special celebratory flavour to their sacred rituals and helps to distinguish between these practices and everyday life.

Thirdly, this issue has a practical dimension. Since Pagan sacred clothing is often hand-embroidered, it needs to be handled with special care. Wearing it only for some hours at a sacred site undoubtedly helps to preserve ritual clothing better than if it was worn for the entire day, especially traveling in crowded public transportation (cars are still a luxury for many Ukrainians).

Folk Art: Altars

a) General Characteristics

Altars have been important components of many religions for millennia since they represent a “place where humans and deities establish[...], negotiate[...] and maintain[...] their relationships” (Beezley 1997:93 quoted in Magliocco 2001: 8). Like in the case of Western Pagan altars studied by Magliocco (Magliocco 2001: 8-22), Ukrainian Pagan altars are structures where particular ritual tools are placed. These structures can be divided into two broad categories: “portable” and “stationary.” The former can be transported and set up at each particular Pagan event. They represent what Magliocco refers to as “ephemeral art” since a particular altar is displayed for only those hours during a particular sacred occasion, and then is taken down. Even though the same ritual

objects can form part of a different altar in the future, their arrangement and combination will never be the same (Magliocco 2001: 10). “Stationary” altars of Ukrainian Pagans are usually located in their temples (in the case of RUNVira), offices, and/or in people’s homes.

Although Magliocco does not emphasize this issue, her research reveals that, in line with the individualistic nature of Western Paganism, for Western Pagan altars individualistic features dominate over collective ones. Magliocco describes a variety of different altars displaying the particular belief systems or sets of values of their individual owners. Even “community” altars feature many individualistic characteristics. They are usually composed of disparate objects belonging to various community members. In contrast, in line with the collective nature of Ukrainian Paganism, collective characteristics dominate over individualistic features in Ukrainian Pagan altars.

b) Case Examples

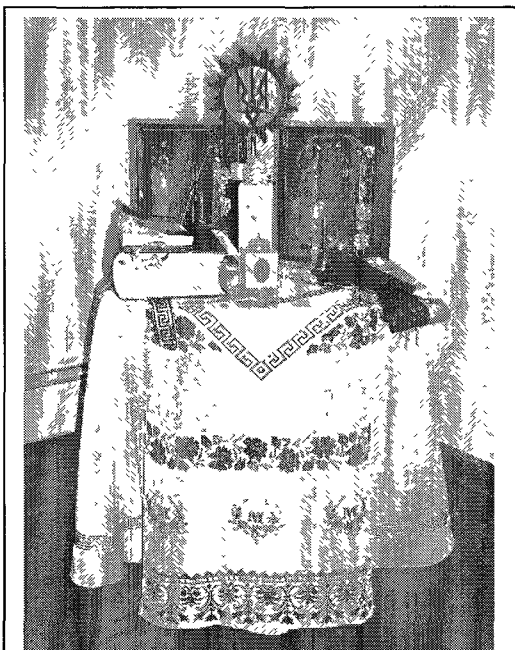
RUNtato Boholiub and RUNmama Svitanna, the leaders of the Spring Glen RUNVira community, have an altar at their home in Shelton, Connecticut, USA (Fig. 10-10). The altar includes all the attributes that are necessary for conducting a RUNVira ritual. Since it takes over two hours to drive from their home to the Oriiana Holy Temple, RUNtato Boholiub conducts minor rituals (e.g. a short prayer before meals and birthday parties) at home.

The altar is established on a small table covered with four different embroidered cloths. The top and bottom pieces are decorated with meander

designs associated with Mezyn culture. There is a portable metal *Dazhbozh Sign* [Знамення Дажбоже], a mandatory attribute of RUNVira services, in the middle of the altar. A copy of *Maha Vira* and *Sviashchenna Knyha Obriadiv* [Sacred Book of Rituals] are placed on the left side on the altar table. On the right side, lies a folded *sviadana*. There is also a small container with soil from Ukraine. One lump of soil is from RUNmama Svitanna's mother's village. The other is from the town of Kaniv, where Taras Shevchenko is buried. In addition, there are two candlesticks placed on this altar. Boholiub and Svitana like the smaller of these candlesticks because it features stylized ears of wheat. To them, this design

symbolizes the centuries-old agricultural lifestyle of the Ukrainian people.

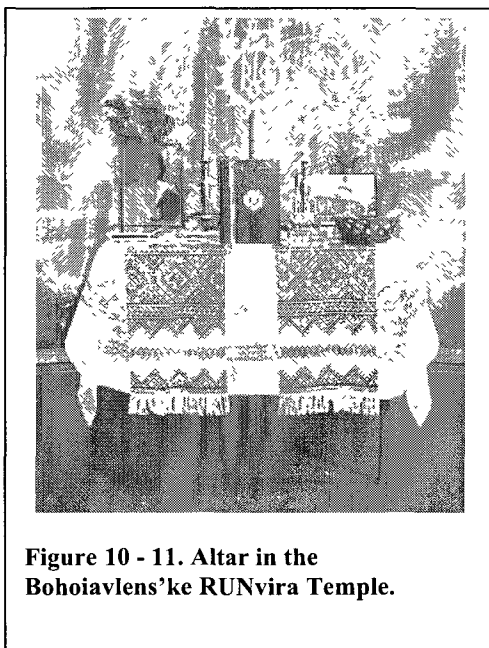
The framed images of Father Or' and Mother Lel', decorated with artificial flowers, are especially interesting. These are miniature reproductions of the original paintings displayed at the Oriiana Holy Temple. The story behind these paintings is fascinating. RUNmama Svitanna and RUNtato Boholiub became acquainted



**Figure 10 -10. Svyrydenko's home
RUNVira Altar. April 13, 2008.**

with RUNVira in the late 1960s in the USA. Prior to this, they belonged to the Christian Church. They were married by a Christian priest in a refugee camp in

Germany shortly after WWII. On this occasion, the couple received two framed icons of Jesus Christ and the Mother of God. They brought these icons with them to the United States of America. However, when they accepted Sylenko's teachings and RUNVira, Svitanna and Boholiub replaced the Christian icons with the images of Mother Lel' and Father Or', having left all the original decorations (artificial flowers) unchanged.



Since the Spring Glen RUNVira community separated from their Teacher, Swyrydenky's altar does not include any attributes specifically referring to Lev Sylenko. In this respect, it differs from the altars created by those communities that continue to closely identify themselves with Sylenko.

The following items are displayed on the altar table of the Sylenko RUNVira Temple in Bohoiavlens'ke: a vase with flowers (including poppies and cornflowers), a vase with ears of wheat, a *znamennia Dazhbozhe*, two candles in candle sticks, a *sviadana*, RUNVira publications (including *Sviashchenna Knyha Obriadi* and a short version of *Maha Vira* published in L'viv), a small jar with water and a container with soil. A portrait of the Prophet Lev Sylenko is also placed on the altar table (Fig. 10-11).

c) *Individual vs. Collective in Ukrainian Pagan Altars*

One can find some differences between the two RUNVira altars described above, especially with regard to the figure of Sylenko. The Bohoiavlens'ke community sanctifies their Prophet by placing his portrait on the altar table. In contrast, by including his publications on their altar, the Spring Glen community recognizes Sylenko as the main ideologist of RUNVira but does not “worship” him by not including his portrait. As a private structure, Swyrydenky's altar presents some individualistic features such as the images of Father Or and Mother Lel' accompanied by a personal narrative.

In general, however, both altars follow the rules established by the founder of RUNVira, Sylenko. He provides a very detailed description of the items that should constitute a RUNVira altar and explains their symbolism. According to Sylenko, ears of wheat should be placed there to symbolize a *sviatylyshche* [holy place] from Trypillian times. Soil must be brought from the field of Trypillia, specifically, from that place where the settlements of Trypillians were found. Water is supposed to be from the major river of Ukraine, the Dniro.

Altars of polytheistic Pagan groups have many similarities to those of RUNVira. They also include a great amount of embroidery and various ritual objects. However, since polytheistic Pagans conduct their rituals predominantly outdoors, “portable” altars dominate over “stationary” ones in their communities. Figure 10-12 depicts how an Ancestral Fire altar is being set up by two Volkhvy for the Kupalo rituals in the context of their *Kupalo Wreath* festival in Kyiv in

June, 2008. Three small stools placed next to each other are covered with a richly embroidered cloth, *rushnyk*. The following items are displayed on this structure:



Figure 10 - 12. Ancestral Fire Volkvy Iarovyt and Bohumyr set up an altar. Several followers stand aside watching them.

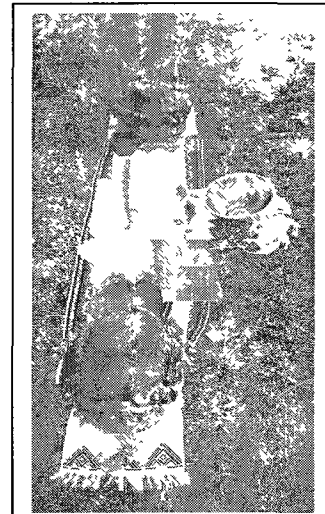


Figure 10 - 13. An Ancestral Fire altar set up for the Perun celebration.

two ritual breads (one covered with an additional *rushnyk*), a wooden alaty, and a candle. An Ancestral Fire follower holds a cow's horn that is to be added later to this altar.

This same community set up an altar for a different occasion – the celebration of the holiday of Perun. Three embroidered *rushnyky* are spread out on the ground. The following items are displayed on them: two bowls, a cow's horn, a pitcher, a copy of *The Service Book* and two ritual breads. Although the two Ancestral Fire altars described differ from each other in terms of their form, the items included on each are very similar.

In contrast to *individualistic aesthetics* communicated through Western Pagan altars, Ukrainian Pagans display *collective aesthetics* connected with the standardization of these sacred objects. Standardization seems to be a distinct

feature of many Ukrainian Pagan practices. For example, at the Triennial RUNVira Council in Bohoiavlens'ke in 2008, one of the major issues addressed by delegates was inconsistency in RUNVira rituals in different communities across Ukraine. Many RUNVira followers expressed their concerns about the fact that different group leaders introduce many innovations to their rituals. To them, standardization is important and can be achieved if all leaders closely follow Sylenko's *Service Book*. The majority of the delegates agreed.

On the one hand, *collective aesthetics* and standardization promoted by Ukrainian Pagans are connected with the collective nature of this phenomenon in general. On the other hand, *collective aesthetics* and standardization can also lead to distinctiveness by helping to create easily recognizable "logos." Diversity may be associated with chaos and may be confusing to outsiders. It is important for Ukrainian Pagans to be recognized as a legitimate religion by larger society. Standardization brings order and helps Pagans construct distinct group identities and, thus, to more easily receive outside recognition. This idea resonates with the discussion of ethnographic diversity versus distinct ethnicity in Chapter VII (p. 200).

e) Altars and Power

Another feature that distinguishes Ukrainian Pagans' altars from those of their Western counterparts is connected not with the structures themselves but with the individuals who assemble them. Since any member of American Pagan communities can contribute to building an altar, one altar can accommodate the

beliefs of various individuals. One particular example – the community altar at Pagan Spirit Gathering in 1993, a midwestern summer festival – is especially interesting. Its appeal lies not only in the bricolage of traditions but also in these Pagans' humorous response to the stereotypic image of femininity in Western society:

Individuals contributed to the formation of this altar throughout the week-long event, often bringing statuettes and natural objects from home. The resulting bricolage has an aesthetic appeal that unites the disparate images, which range from an inflatable globe (representing Mother Earth) to a deer skull (representing the horned god) to a Barbie doll in full ritual dress standing behind a tiny altar of her own, complete with magical tools. This ironic use of tactics involves an international reinterpretation of Barbie, a popular culture icon of femininity. The humor lies in the juxtaposition of two opposing concepts: the idealized but plastic image of womanhood embodied by Barbie and that of woman as an earthly, powerful, alluring, and potentially dangerous Witch. (Magliocco: 2001: 18-19)

In line with the hierarchical nature of this religion, Ukrainian Pagan altars are assembled predominantly by the leaders of communities. The leaders play an active role in this process while their followers remain in the position of passive observers (see Fig. 10-12). This is another example of how the leaders have more access to the sacred, than the entire congregation. In this way, their authoritative positions are emphasized.

f) Pagan Folk Art: Collective Meaning

Traditional folk art dominates in Pagan aesthetics. Based on his studies of various cultural contexts, philosopher of art Richard Anderson emphasizes the

importance of art's capacity to create and “convey culturally significant meaning”:

For all the diverse aspects of meaning in art, the central conclusion remains. In very many cases, if not all cases, *art has meaning* – and usually meaning of considerable significance in the culture it comes from [emphasis – RA]. Cultures vary in their definition of what is and what is not significant; and there are differences in the overtness with which the meaning is manifest in the artwork. Nevertheless, art does typically convey culturally significant meaning. (Anderson 2004: 303)

Folk art, whether represented by archeological cultures or contemporary peasant traditions, is a meaningful and powerful resource for contemporary



Figure 10 - 14.
Alexander Archipenko (1887-1964). Woman combing her hair (1914). Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Archipenko is a world-renowned Ukrainian American sculptor. Although he has added to Ukrainian national pride, his works alone do not awaken any associations with Ukrainian culture.

Ukrainian Pagan spirituality. Through folk art, Ukrainian Pagans symbolically enter the imagined world of their ancestors. By introducing the perceived ancient magical symbolism of folk art motifs, contemporary Ukrainian Pagans present their ancestors as a spiritually rich and powerful community. The anonymity and “collective” nature of folk art linked to “primordial” traditions strengthen their arguments. They translate these aspects into a national wisdom that has been formed over many millennia.

It is specifically folk art that makes Pagans and their practices distinctly Ukrainian or Slavic because, as discussed previously, it is closely linked to a particular geographic territory. Because of this link, folk art is a

more effective tool for the construction of a national Ukrainian or pan-Slavic identity than are many forms of fine art. While many Ukrainian elite artists have made significant contributions to the European and world art scene, which has resulted in increased national pride, their works represent *global aesthetics*. In most cases, the only link their audiences can make with Ukrainian culture is through the names of the artists and their own claims that they belong to a particular nation (for example, see Fig. 10-14).

Since Ukrainian Pagans associate Ukrainianess with physical beauty, they do not simply borrow folk motifs in their “original” forms but polish them and incorporate them into more complex compositions, emphasizing both “Ukrainianess” and beauty.

Fine Art: Artist as a Sacred Figure

It is not only folk art that nourishes contemporary Ukrainian Paganism. Fine art also occupies a prominent niche in this movement. Let me focus on two artists who significantly contributed to the development of modern Ukrainian Paganism.

a) Musician Zhyvosyl Liutyi

I met Zhyvosyl Liutyi, a known cultural activist, composer and bandura player, during my fieldwork in Ukraine in 2007. He writes his own songs that he sings while accompanying himself on the bandura. Both the lyrics and the music of Zhyvosyl’s songs often have a powerful effect on his listeners. His lyrics

frequently include complex poetic imagery from the imagined ancestral past along with references to contemporary village folklore. Such content reflects the polytheistic beliefs of Ancestral Fire, the group to which Zhyvosyl has belonged for several years and where the foundation for his religious convictions was established.

Musically, Zhyvosyl's songs are pleasant and melodic and very engaging. In addition, they are compositionally simple; most of them are based on a two-part structure, including verses with repeated choruses. The melodies are simple and predictable, follow standard harmonic patterns, and often feature a significant amount of repetition of particular melodic phrases that facilitates group singing. In addition, the majority of Zhyvosyl's songs are based on modal tonality that gives them an ancient feeling. This feel is reinforced by the fact that Liutyi plays the bandura (although his songs are completely suitable for the guitar), which is widely perceived as an ancient Ukrainian musical instrument.

Zhyvosyl's creative legacy has crossed geographical and political borders. In the spring of 2008, when I visited the RUNVira community in Spring Glen, New York, I was very surprised to hear his songs at one RUNVira family's home, considering that monotheistic RUNVira followers are usually hostile towards their polytheistic counterparts.

b) Painter Viktor (Sontseslav) Kryzhanivs'kyi

I met Viktor (Sontseslav) Kryzhanivs'kyi in the summer of 2008. Kryzhanivs'kyi is a professor of the Department of (Academic) Drawing at the

Kyiv National Academy of Fine Arts and Architecture. As a former graduate of this Academy, he is trained in the academic tradition of classical European art.

He kindly invited me to his studio in Kyiv, where I was introduced to the world of old Slavic mythology as visualized in his paintings. Kryzhanivs'kyi also took me to one of the most affluent suburbs of Kyiv known as Koncha-Zaspa. This area is especially known for its elite mansions. The owner of one such mansion, an “independent” Pagan, commissioned Kryzhanivs'kyi to paint Pagan-themed murals on the walls of his house (Fig. 10-15). In line with the main tendency of the Kyiv art school, Kryzhanivs'kyi's works are predominantly realistic. His images also feature a somewhat surrealistic flavour, especially in the depiction of mythological themes.

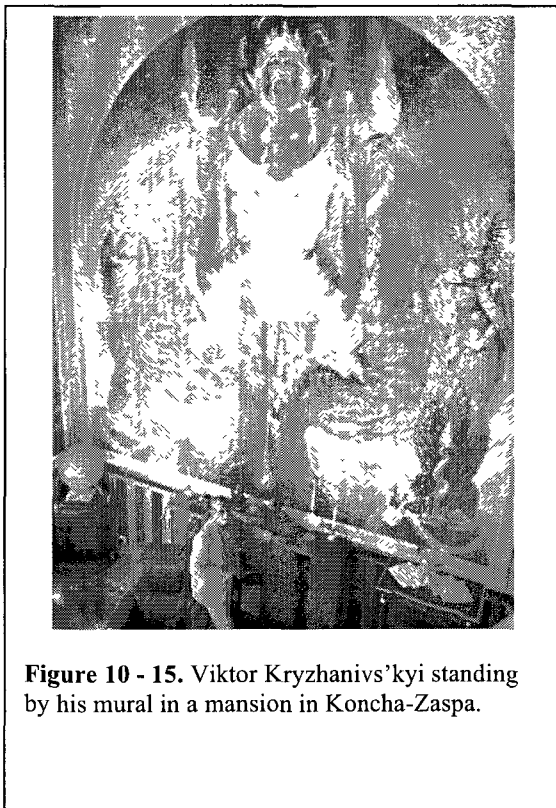


Figure 10 - 15. Viktor Kryzhanivs'kyi standing by his mural in a mansion in Koncha-Zaspa.

I had been familiar with Kryzhanivs'kyi's works before I met the artist in person. Like Zhyvosyl Liutyi's songs, Kryzhanivs'kyi's visual art has crossed geographical and political borders. I saw a reproduction of his painting “Iarylo” (god of spring sun and fertility, according to contemporary Pagan interpretations) at the home of RUNtato Boholiub and RUNmama

Svitanna Swyrydenky in Connecticut. RUNmama Svitoslava shared her knowledge about Iarylo. She noted that, in the distant past, those female ancestors of contemporary Ukrainians who suffered fertility problems would address their concerns and prayers to Iarylo. This reproduction is displayed on a wall of the Swyrydenky's home, behind their RUNVira altar. They both expressed their admiration for Kryzhanivs'kyi's work, mentioning that they acquired this particular reproduction from the artist himself when they met him in Kyiv several years previous. This is intriguing, considering that they are the (diaspora) leaders of RUNVira, a group that is generally hostile towards the contemporary polytheism that Kryzhanivs'kyi actively depicts.

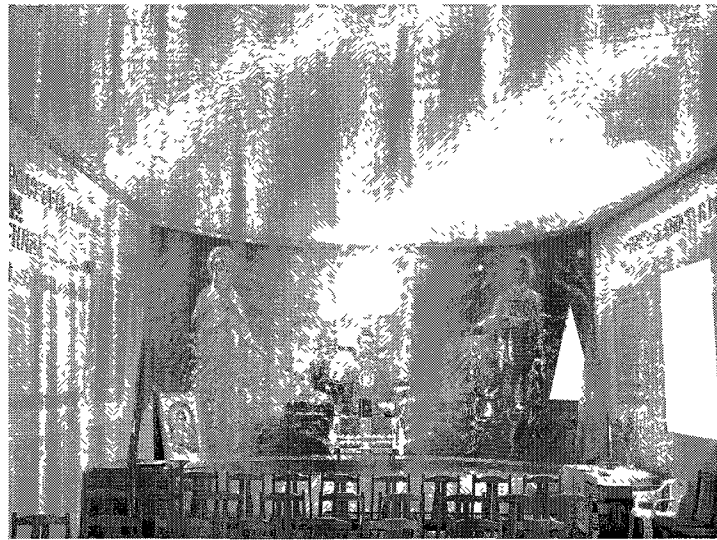


Figure 10 - 16. RUNVira Temple Sanctuary wall painted by V. Kryzhanivs'kyi.

The Fig. 10-16 was taken during the tri-annual RUNVira Council in the village of Bohoiavlens'ke, Kirovohrad region, Ukraine, the birthplace of Lev Sylenko. This photograph shows the sanctuary of the Bohoiavlens'ke Temple,

with a feature-wall painted by Victor Kryzhanivs'kyi. The painting represents Mother Lel' and Father Or', with a portrait of Lev Sylenko in the middle.

c) Artists in the Contexts of Different Pagan Ideologies

While there is definite hostility between different Ukrainian Pagan groups and their leaders, artists such as Zhyvosyl Liutyi and Victor Kryzhanivs'kyi (among others) seem to be highly appreciated by all. A RUNVira adherent who strongly criticized polytheistic images Kryzhanivs'kyi created for Ancestral Fire (as described in Chapter VI), admired the artist's work on the sanctuary wall in the Bohoiavlens'ke Temple. His criticism was not of Kryzhanivs'kyi, but of the followers of Ancestral Fire who had commissioned the polytheistic project.

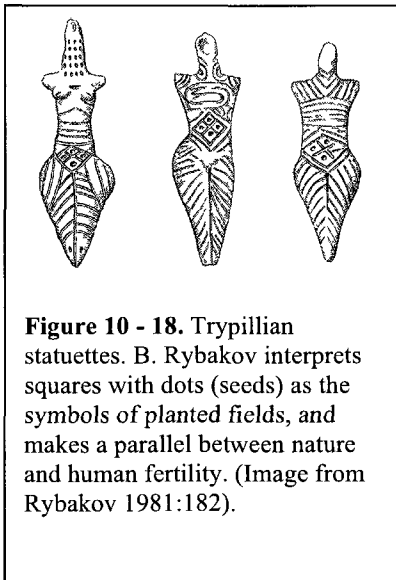
Although Native Faith, and in particular its leader Halyna Lozko, have many ideological disagreements with both RUNVira and Ancestral Fire, they also share an appreciation for Kryzhanivs'kyi's paintings. For example, reproductions of Kryzhanivs'kyi's works form part of a series of cards titled *Kolo Svarozhe* [Svaroh cycle] produced by Native Faith. His works also often illustrate Native Faith's periodical *Svaroh*. The fact that these disparate groups with conflicting ideologies all find that similar works of a single artist reflects those particular ideologies seems somewhat paradoxical.

d) Aesthetics as an Ideological Bridge

One may argue that the reason artists enjoy special treatment among the adherents of different Pagan ideologies lies in the fact that there are not many

artists who promote Pagan themes, limiting Pagans' choices. However, this is no longer the case. Pagan themes are currently trendy and attract a great number of creative individuals, whether or not they define themselves as Pagans. As a result, there are many art and music products on the contemporary market for Pagans to choose from (Fig. 10-18).

This paradox illustrates the importance of aesthetics and beauty in Ukrainian Paganism. It demonstrates that art can overcome political and ideological sentiments and boundaries, and can help to establish bridges between hostile ideologies and individuals. Individual artists serve as powerful mediators in this process.



e) Individualistic Creativity as a Form of Sacred Knowledge

On one hand, polytheistic Ukrainian Pagans strongly reject the idea that their beliefs and practices involve creativity. To these Pagans, the term “creative” implies “removed from ancestral traditions.” On the other hand, the majority of Ukrainian Pagans, both monotheists and polytheists, highly value individualistic creativity. In simple terms, a suggestion that “rituals and beliefs are invented” would be offensive to many Ukrainian Pagans while “the past as visualized by a particular artist” would be a completely acceptable concept and even appreciated.

While referring to art and creativity in contemporary Western Paganism, Magliocco agrees with Loretta Orion that art is essential for both individual and collective Pagan spiritual experiences (Magliocco 2001:7). In addition, as she paraphrases Orion, “[b]ecause creativity and artistry involve transformation, these processes become analogous and equivalent to magical acts: the artist is by definition a magician” (Magliocco 2001: 7).

Ukrainian Pagan artists are magicians, and this explains their special position in Pagan communities. However, the artists themselves, who are conscious of their roles in the development of this religion, use somewhat different terminology. Victor Kryzhanivs'kyi describes his process of creation in terms of his special access to sacred *knowledge* [знання or відання]. This process is closely connected with meditation. According to Kryzhanivs'kyi, meditation leads his mind to transformation that, in turn, lets him “access” the realm of sacred *knowledge*. The majority of Kryzhanivs'kyi's artistic images have

appeared to him in this way, as was the case with the composition presented in Fig. 10 - 14. The following is Kryzhanivs'kyi's narrative describing this work:

This is the Tree of Life. Three worlds are depicted here: the worlds of Iava, Nava and Prava. Svaroh, the embodiment of the Universe, is in the centre. This is the way I see him. He represents the embodiment of the element of fire. Then Lada or the Mother of the World, let us refer to her this way. Svaroh holds a sword decorated with flowers, which is typical for Ukrainians, because we are a peaceful people...He also holds a lit torch. I've organized everything in such a way that it looks like a *Trysutia* (trident), with three tips. In the middle of this *Trysutia*, there are images of the male and female origins. Then, one can see Lelia, the goddess of love and Lada, the goddess of birth. The next is a transmission from Iava to Nava, from which grows a seed, the kernel of life. This is where the Gods are glorified. I split the trunk of the Tree. This is where I depict raised arms and various scenes. There, on the trees, as if in shade, sits the oracular bird. On the sides, one can see the sculpted images of Svaroh and Perun. This is my view.⁸

Similar narratives can be heard from non-Pagan artists who, in the context of their creative search, meditatively alter their consciousness which, in turn, helps them imagine their future work. However, in contrast to other creators, Kryzhanivs'kyi, in his narratives, imparts his experiences with a special sacred flavour. What other artists may refer to as “creative imagination” Kryzhanivs'kyi translates into “access to sacred knowledge.”

Another important aspect that brings people like Kryzhanivs'kyi and Liutyi special recognition in Pagan communities is connected with the individualistic nature of fine art. Folk art is more “collective” in character. Although individual folk artists may introduce many innovative ideas and variations into their works, and be recognized and honoured, they usually draw

upon collective elements such as traditional *pysanka* or embroidery motifs. Everyone has equal access to these sources. Although folk art carries sacred meaning for Ukrainian Pagans, “individualistic” fine art occupies a special position due to the fact that fine art is not as accessible to a great number of people. Instead, only select individuals are perceived as carriers of special sacred gifts. While the majority of interested Pagans can (relative quickly) master embroidery and *pysanka* writing, fine art usually requires special inclination and prolonged professional education.⁹

Fine art is perceived as highly intellectual. The artist’s conceptual skills are more greatly appreciated than his or her technical abilities (Anderson 2004: 320). For example, in the Western art world, which is known for its long tradition of apprenticeship, is usually the artist who introduces a concept or an idea that is shaped by his or her personal vision and produces the main layout of a future work. The technical realization of a project can be completed by the artist’s apprentices. This technical part is often treated as craft. In other words, “[f]or most societies, it is in the mind, rather than the hand, where true artistic genius is to be found” (Anderson 2004: 320):

Skill alone does not make art, but societies inevitably recognize the exceptional capacities of the artist. The extent to which the artist’s heightened abilities are inborn are unknown, but it is clear that art’s specialness, its ability to convey potent meaning, and its capacity to effect the emotions of the percipient, must in part result from the artist’s exceptional skill of execution. (Anderson 2004: 321)

Both Zhyvosyl Liutyi and Viktor Kryzhanivs’kyi are highly appreciated not only for their technical skills but also for their ideas. With the help of aural

and visual means, they have managed to create what my interviewees refer to as the “beautiful world” and “fairy tale.”

Aesthetics versus Politics: Speculations About the Future of Ukrainian Paganism

When it comes to a discussion of a new religious movement, the question that always arises is that of its future. Scholars attempt to predict how long such a movement will exist, focusing on the reasons for its potential development or decline. Anthony Wallace, in his conceptual framework on new religious movements, identifies five stages of potential development. These stages form what Wallace calls “processual structure.”

The first stage identified by Wallace is *Steady State*, when society is relatively stable and has its own techniques for tolerating stress. The second stage is *The Period of Increased Individual Stress*, when society experiences stress and exhausts its techniques for handling it. At this stage, it needs an alternative way of dealing with turbulence. Then follows *The Period of Cultural Distortion* characterized by chaos and anxiety over the loss of a meaningful way of life. The fourth stage is represented by *The Period of Revitalization*, which is often associated with charismatic leaders whose ideas are conceived in hallucinatory visions, revelations, or inspirations. Leaders preach their views to others, offering protection and benefits. In this way, a new movement becomes organized, developing a hierarchical structure. If effective, the new ideas become adapted and gradually ‘routinized’ leading to the formation of the new (fifth) *Steady State* (Wallace 1956: 268-275). Wallace argues that while some revitalization

movements can be very successful, others can fail at any point within the “processual structure.” Among other factors, their success depends on how “realistic” the movement’s ideas are and on the “amount of force” represented by its opponents (Wallace 1956: 278).

Adrian Ivakhiv hypothesizes about the future of Ukrainian Paganism. In his opinion, this movement may follow the same pattern as its Western, specifically Anglo-American counterpart, and “become both more modern (i.e., more scientifically informed) and postmodern (self-reflexive and aware of its creative nature)” (Ivakhiv 2005a: 29). In Ivakhiv’s opinion, this can be achieved if Ukrainian Pagans better familiarize themselves with Western scholarship and Western Pagan literature influenced by this scholarship. In such a case, Ukrainian Pagans may achieve wider recognition as a legitimate religion. As of today, they remain very isolated, being exposed predominantly to like-minded Eastern and Central European Pagans (Ivakhiv 2005a: 29-30).

In other words, Ivakhiv argues that reflexivity and inclusiveness may help Ukrainian Pagans to make their ideas more “realistic” and, thus, more successful for future development, to apply Wallace’s theoretical framework. While agreeing with Ivakhiv, I propose to expand on the discussion of the future of Ukrainian Paganism by drawing upon Wallace’s ideas in their relationship to the notions of aesthetics versus politics.

In my opinion, aesthetics will play a significant role in the future development of Ukrainian Paganism. However, the different emphases that individual groups put on aesthetics and beauty may lead to dissimilar paths in the

future for these communities. As discussed throughout this work, politics is most strongly communicated within RUNVira while Native Faith emphasizes folkloric practices, and Ancestral Fire prioritizes magic. Let me expand on this discussion by first presenting a number of encounters from my fieldwork.

Boholiub Swyrydenko, the leader of the remaining most active North American RUNVira community in Spring Glen, New York, showed me the cemetery near the Oriiana Holy Temple. He commented poignantly, “today, there are many more of us in the cemetery than in the Temple.” Swyrydenko was especially concerned that the youth do not join RUNVira.

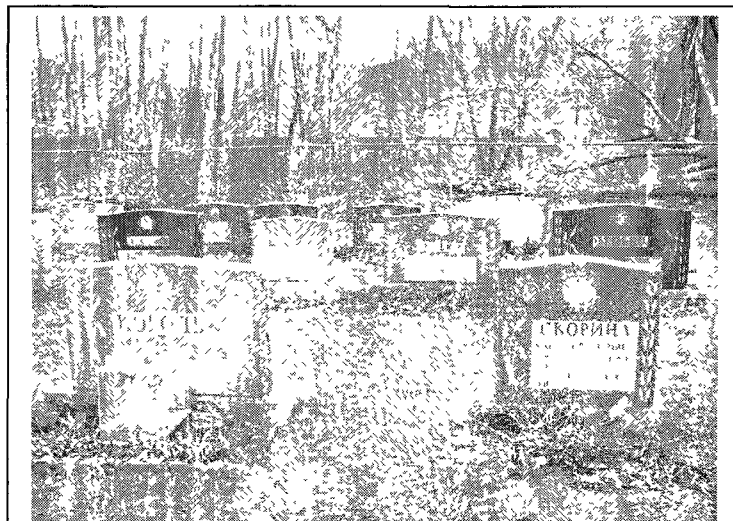


Figure 10 - 19. RUNVira cemetery near the Oriiana Holy Temple in Spring Glen, NY, USA. April 13, 2008. Note the major symbolic elements on the stone monuments: the Ukrainian trident emblem (called *Trysuttia* by RUNvira followers) encircled by the image of stylized sun (symbolizing Dazhboh), stylized figures of Mother Lel' and Father Or, and images of wheat.

The situation with RUNVira in Ukraine is very similar. I observed that the youngest representatives of RUNVira are in their late fifties to early sixties.

Several young people mentioned that their Pagan paths began with RUNVira. However, after having attended a few gatherings, they became disappointed and eventually joined other Pagan groups. One female interviewee in her early twenties mentioned that she felt like a complete outsider in a RUNVira community. The majority of its members were elderly people who talked predominantly about colonial politics. My respondent could not relate to their discussions.

Although RUNVira costumes, attributes and rituals may be aesthetically pleasing, political themes still dominate the narratives and activities of its followers. The children and grandchildren of founding members from the 1960s and 1970s cannot relate to the political sentiments of their predecessors.

In contrast, Native Faith and Ancestral Fire make a greater emphasis on aesthetics communicated through music, visual (fine) art, crafts, clothing, ritual forms, martial arts and/or magic. Political themes, although present in their published literature and individual narratives, are either deemphasized or absent in their sacred rituals and cultural activities. Young people often join these Pagan communities not because of political reasons but, rather, because they are attracted by the colourful and aesthetically pleasing Pagan culture. To use Wallace's terms, it is aesthetics that make Pagan practices attractive and, thus, "realistic." Unlike colonial politics, that in the case of RUNVira has many (young) opponents, aesthetics do not usually elicit negative impressions. This "fairy tale" and "beautiful world" is a place to escape from the turbulent context of post-Soviet reality. It is also a place to form a new desirable reality and

profound experiences. That is why, in my opinion, these groups have a greater chance for successful development in the future than RUNVira.

Concluding Remarks:

Ukrainian Paganism in the Context of Modernity and Globalization

Ukrainian Paganism emerged as a response to the fear of the globalization and homogenization of indigenous Ukrainian culture in the context of global modernity. Intriguingly, however, it is modernity that created a favourable context for its development. Ukrainian Pagans strive to (re)create the folklore of the distant past with the help of modern technological resources, strategies and ideas.

Ukrainian Paganism has spread globally thanks to such contemporary means as print publications, the Internet and high-speed transportation. Although this religion is closely tied to the *sacred land* of Ukraine, it was not Ukraine's geographical territory that provided the fertile ground for its initial development. Instead, Ukrainian Paganism had actively evolved far beyond the political borders of its ancestral territory before it reached the homeland in the early 1980s. This process fits Arjun Appadurai's theoretical framework on gravitation and influences in the context of globalization. Appadurai challenges the "centre – periphery" model, emphasizing, instead, the mutual influences of different landscapes in the process of their interaction. Appadurai argues that the spread of influence is also possible in the reverse direction – from the "periphery" to the "centre" (Appadurai 1996: 32). Although Ukraine has always been considered the

ideological “centre” of this Ukrainian Paganism, it reached its centre from the “periphery” of the Ukrainian diaspora.

On the basis of extensive ethnographic research, contemporary scholars challenge previous academic discourse where *modernity* and *globalization* were viewed as forces that lead to the homogenization of indigenous cultures. In the context of globalization, these cultures were expected to blend into one Western model. This theoretical framework has proven to be insufficient for describing the contemporary world. Culture today is viewed as a process based on constant contact between various traditions resulting in frequent changes and new, diverse formations.

The phenomenon of Ukrainian Paganism is one such formation. It does not blend into a single global cultural pattern, but creates its own niche in the context of modernity. In this respect, it represents the process of “indigenization of modernity” rather than its homogenization, to use Marshal Sahlins’ concept (Sahlins 1999: vi–vii). Ukrainian Paganism demonstrates the need to view the contemporary world in terms of “multiple modernities,” as proposed by Shmuel N. Eisenstadt and Wolfgang Schluchter (1998). Sahlins would look at the formation of an alternative identity by Ukrainian Pagans as the self-conscious “demand of the people for their own space within the world cultural order” (1999: vi–vii). Ukrainian Pagans build and emphasize their cultural uniqueness, representing a new indigenous phenomenon in the context of global modernity.

¹ I am borrowing Bakhtin’s term “authoritative discourse” as applied by Alexei Yurchak in his *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More The Last Soviet Generation* (2006) Yurchak

argues that a tendency to conceptualize Soviet life in terms of the immorality of socialism and the people as its victims began after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Yurchak 2006: 6). Through interviewing representatives of the last generation of Komsomol members, Yurchak finds that indeed what he calls complex “cultural shifts” were characteristic for the late Soviet period. These shifts were represented by people’s responses to the “authoritative discourse” officially produced by the Party. The responses simultaneously mirrored and rejected the authoritative discourse.

² [] вся краса цього українського обряду, всі ці вишиванки, віночки, вся оця от атрибутика природи і життя людського, культури, воно разом в цілості творить отакий от прекрасний світ.

³ At the time of our interview, Zlatana belonged to an Ancestral Fire community in Odesa. However, since she traveled often across Ukraine, she also actively participated in the activities of other Pagan groups, including Native Faith.

⁴ Він мені перший розповів про це повністю. Зіграв пісні. Що саме мене зачепило, – він почав співати, грати на бандурі, і щось таке прокинулось в душі, щось таке рідне відчулось. В цей час я не дуже добре знала рідну мову, рідну культуру, була дуже далеко від неї. Тому що я була з Одеси, а в Одесі це не сильно, так скажемо, розповсюджено. Там більше російськомовних і російських патріотів. Тоді я познайомилась з ним і це було перше таке захоплення – людина така, вона шукає свою природу, свої корені.

⁵ Це не тому, що я язичник і повинен творити лише язичницькі образи. Ні, мені справді просто цікаво їх робити. Образи Перуна і Велеса є для мене якимись невичерпними. Я їх як хочу, так і роблю. І багато їх образів можна сотворити.

⁶ The place that folk embroidery occupied in the Soviet era differed from that of other kinds of folk art. *Pysanka* writing, for example, was closely tied to the Church and associated with magic. Since neither religion nor magic fit Soviet ideology, both writing *pysanky* and studying this tradition were discouraged during Soviet times. In contrast, in the case of embroidery, it was easier to emphasize its exclusively aesthetic aspect.

⁷ The symbol of *Berehynia* is discussed in Chapter IV.

⁸ Оце от Дерево Життя. Тут показано три світи: світ Яви, Нави і Прави. В центрі – уособлення Всесвіту – Сварог. Отак я його бачу. Вогняна така стихія. Потім Лада чи Марієв Світу, назвем її так. Сварог стоїть з мечем, який уквітчаний, що типowo для нас, українців, що ми мирні люди. І смолоскип з вогнем. Все це я так закомпоную, що воно виглядає, як Трисуття, тобто є три верхівки. І в середині цього Трисуття – чоловіче і жіноче начала. Потім Леля і Лада. Леля – Богиня кохання, а Лада – Богиня народження. А далі – перехід з Явного в Наву, звідки виростає зерно, колос життя. Там ідуть Славлення оцих Богів. Я прориваю простір Дерева, стовбура і там ідуть оці підняті руки, різні сценки. Там сидять на деверах, отак ніби в тіні, птахи Гамаюн. Тут [по боках] зображення уже ніби скульптурні ідуть Сварога і Перуна. Ну і жертвоприношення. Це таке бачення моє.

⁹ These ideas are largely generalized for heuristic purposes. In reality, the above raised issues are more complex. In North America, the definition of “(fine) artist” does not necessarily imply a prolonged professional training. Ukrainian art traditions are rather conservative in this respect. Understandably, the length of professional training is not always connected with quality (which, in turn, is connected with context, personal taste of potential judges, etc.). Moreover, there are highly distinguished artists in Ukraine such as Maria Prymachenko who have never received any professional education. Many critics, while recognizing the profound individualistic and innovative nature of her fantastic images and themes, treat her works as fine art.

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	RUNVIRA	NATIVE FAITH	ANCESTRAL FIRE
HISTORY			
Origins	North American diaspora, 1960s	Ukraine, middle 1930s – early 1940s	Ukraine, 2003
Founders	Lev Sylenko (1921-2008), Prophet and Teacher	Volodymyr Shaian (1908-1974)	Volodymyr Kurovs'kyi (born 1976)
Dissemination and Development	<p>1960s-1980s Diaspora communities in North America, Western Europe, Australia and New Zealand, appr 40 communities</p> <p>1980s Major split into 2 branches (OSID and OSIDU)</p> <p>1991 First community registered in Ukraine</p>	<p>During WWII European refugee camps</p> <p>After WWII Canada, several people</p> <p>Since 1993 revived in Ukraine</p>	<p>Communities across Ukraine and Russia</p> <p>Small community in Germany</p> <p>2007 Major split, several communities separated</p>
Present-day situation	<p>Rapidly declines in the diaspora</p> <p>Has grown in Ukraine since 1991 but attracts predominantly older people</p> <p>Ukraine, mid-2000s OCID – 38 communities, OCIDU-26 communities</p> <p>USA 1 remaining active community in Spring Glen, NY</p>	<p>Develops actively in Ukraine, attracting both older people and youth</p> <p>Ukraine 29 communities</p> <p>Canada several elderly individuals</p>	<p>Develops very actively in Ukraine, Russia and among some immigrant communities in Western Europe, attracting many young people</p> <p>Ukraine 20 communities, 6 initiative groups</p> <p>Russia 18 communities and initiative groups</p> <p>Germany 1 community</p>

	RUNVIRA	NATIVE FAITH	ANCESTRAL FIRE
STRUCTURE			
Hierarchy	<p>Prophet and Teacher Sylenko sanctified (by OCIDU)</p> <p><i>RUNiatos</i> or <i>RUNmamas</i> appointed by Sylenko (or his successors) are community leaders who can conduct all rituals</p> <p>Many attempts to organize into one institution with centralized power</p>	<p><i>Volkhvynia</i> [Pagan priestess] Zoreslava (Halyna Lozko) -absolute authority</p> <p><i>Zhrets'Zhrytsia</i> [Pagan priest/priestess] – a rank lower than <i>Volkhvynia</i>, ordained by <i>Volkhvynia</i>, conducts the majority of rituals</p> <p><i>Obiadodu</i> [ritual conductor] – the lowest rank, ordained by either <i>Volkhvynia</i> or <i>Zhrets'Zhrytsia</i>, conducts a limited number of rituals</p>	<p>Supreme <i>Volkhv</i> [Pagan Priest] Volodymyr Kurovs'kyi – absolute authority</p> <p><i>Volkhv/Volkhvynia</i> [Pagan priest/priestess] – ordained by Supreme <i>Volkhv</i>, conducts all rituals</p> <p><i>Vidun</i> [All-knowing individual, Pagan priest, a rank lower than <i>Volkhv</i>], ordained by Supreme <i>Volkhv</i>, conducts rituals if <i>Volkhv</i> is absent</p> <p><i>Zhrets'Zhrytsia</i> [Pagan priest/priestess] – a rank lower than <i>Volkhv</i>, ordained by <i>Volkhv</i>, with the permission of the Supreme <i>Volkhv</i>, conducts a limited number of rites</p>
IDEOLOGY			
	<p>Presented in Sylenko's <i>Maha Vira</i> [Great Faith]</p> <p>Idea of ethnic primordialism, promotion of ethnic religions</p> <p>Strong nationalist and racist sentiments, Ukrainians - superior Europeans, descendants of ancient Aryans</p> <p>Strong resistance to political oppression of Ukraine</p> <p>Strong resistance to Christianity as a "foreign" force attempting to destroy indigenous Ukrainian culture</p>	<p>Presented in numerous publications of leaders, especially Lozko</p> <p>Idea of ethnic primordialism, promotion of ethnic religions</p> <p>Strong nationalist and racist sentiments, active promotion of the "White race"</p> <p>Strong resistance to political oppression of Ukraine</p> <p>Strong resistance to Christianity as a "foreign" attempting to destroy indigenous Ukrainian culture</p>	<p>Presented in numerous publications of leaders, especially Volodymyr and Lada Kurovs'kyi</p> <p>Idea of ethnic primordialism, promotion of ethnic religions</p> <p>Nationalist, racist and anti-Christian sentiments are present but are more subtle</p> <p>Pan-Slavic rather than exclusively Ukraine-oriented,</p> <p>Ecumenical endeavours</p>

	RUNVIRA	NATIVE FAITH	ANCESTRAL FIRE
CHRONOLOGY	Begins from Mizyn culture, 2010 is 11117 Dazhboh year	Begins from Trypillian culture, 2010 is 7518	Begins from Trypillian culture, 2010 is 7518
SPIRITUALITY			
Beliefs	<p>Monotheistic Dazhboh, Sun-god – creator of the Universe</p> <p>reconstructed old Slavic polytheism</p>	<p>Polytheistic many Gods and Goddesses of the old Slavic pantheon, Svaroh, God of light and heavenly fire – the main spiritual deity</p> <p>attempts to accurately revive old Slavic paganism</p>	<p>Polytheistic Rod, the creator of the Universe, appears in the forms of many Gods and Goddesses of the old Slavic pantheon</p> <p>Believe that the spiritual ancestral tradition never broke but was practiced in secret during the unfavourable times</p>
Symbols and Ritual Objects	<p>Objects featuring Ukrainian political symbols blue and yellow flag and trident</p> <p><i>Trysutna</i> (trident encircled by a stylized image of the sun), Meander is associated with the Mezyn culture</p>	<p>Objects featuring Ukrainian political symbols blue and yellow flag and trident</p> <p><i>Svarha</i> (a version of the Swastika), a popular motif in traditional material culture, symbol of Svaroh</p>	<p>Specifically Pagan symbols dominate, <i>Alatyr</i> (eight-point star), a popular motif in traditional material culture, symbol of male and female energies and eternal movement</p>
Sacred Practices	<p>Rites of passage</p> <p>Calendar holidays</p> <p>a) devoted to prominent historical figures, important in the nationalist discourse</p> <p>b) connected with agriculture-related beliefs (modified or created by Sylenko)</p> <p>d) related to particular social issues (Donor Day, Day of the Floral World)</p> <p>e) birthday of the Prophet, <i>Maha Vira</i> day</p>	<p>Rites of passage</p> <p>Calendar holidays (<i>Svaroh's Cycle</i>)</p> <p>devoted to agriculture-related beliefs (revived or (re)constructed by Lozko)</p> <p>Rituals are based on Lozko's interpretations of <i>The Book of Veles</i> and village folklore, Pagans conduct their own folkloric research</p>	<p>Life-affirming rituals (e.g., cleansing places from negative energies)</p> <p>Life-giving rituals (rites of passage)</p> <p>Rituals of <i>Svaroh's Cycle</i> (calendar rituals): folklore-based, connected with agriculturalist beliefs</p> <p>Rituals are based on leaders' interpretations of <i>The Book of Veles</i> and village folklore, Pagans conduct their own folkloric research, many non-Ukrainian elements – Ukrainianized</p>
MAIN FEATURE	(NATIONALIST) POLITICS	FOLKLORE	MAGIC