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**Evidence of Shamanism in Russian Folklore**

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**Evidence of Shamanism in Russian Folklore**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

### **Evidence of Shamanism in Russian Folklore**

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A wealth of East Slavic folklore has been collected throughout Russia, Ukraine, and Belorussia over a period of more than a hundred years. Among the many examinations that have been conducted on the massive corpus of legends, fabulates, memorates, and charms is an attempt to gain some understanding of indigenous East Slavic religion. Unfortunately, such examination of these materials has been overwhelmingly guided by political agenda and cultural bias. As early as 1938, Yuri Sokolov suggested in his book, *Russian Folklore*, that some of Russia's folk practices bore a remarkable resemblance to shamanic practices, commenting specifically on a trance like state which some women induced in themselves by means of an whirling dance. This thesis explains the historical bias against a comparison of East Slavic folklore with shamanism; offers a brief anthropological review of shamanism and conducts a minimal comparison of elements of Russian folklore with the *sine qua non* definitions of two experts on the subject of shamanism.

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## Introduction

The nature of pre-Christian, Slavic religion has simultaneously inspired and puzzled. As scholars work to identify pieces of the story of pre-Christian religion, politics and pop-culture seize upon these fragments and force them together in combinations unsupportable by the evidence. Because there are no extant, first-hand accounts of religious practices from the time before the arrival of Christianity, this void has often been filled with fantasy and propaganda. Russia's desire for its own distinctly Russian identity was so strong that while evidence that failed to support this view was unearthed, research about it was buried. In the absence of other reliable evidence to examine, researchers turned time and again to the *Primary Russian Chronicle* and its brief description of the Kievan idols, a pantheon of six gods. Linguists, including Roman Jakobson, have sought clues to the nature of these gods in the etymologies of their names.<sup>1</sup> Vladimir's gods are frequently arranged into a pantheon like that of the Greeks and Romans, thus organizing them into a respectable Slavic antiquity. In reality, the only documentation we have at all comes to us from such the authors of chronicles or from a handful of foreign authors who mention, never more than briefly, their observations of the religious practices of the Rus'. These descriptions must be considered influenced by the new Christian church's agenda to convert the indigenous population and the accounts

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<sup>1</sup> I refer here to Roman Jakobson's "Contributions to Comparative Mythology and The Slavic God Veles and His Indo-European Cognates" reprinted in *Roman Jakobson: Selected Writings* Vol. VII. (Berlin: Mouton, 1985) and edited by Stephen Rudy.

of the foreign authors must be recognized as being from an outside perspective which may or may not represent any significant understanding of what the authors witnessed or were told. Furthermore, as in the case of the *Hustyn Chronicle* discussed later, these descriptions are often no more than retellings of accounts from older chronicles thus diminishing the number of accounts we may view as true sources.

And what of the figures of Slavic folklore? Where do spirits like the *domovoi*, the *leshii* and the countless other spirits who survived well into the 19th century in tale and tradition figure in to pre-Christian cosmology? Some have suggested that they are the remnants of a great Slavic pantheon, reduced by the Orthodox Church's influence to haunting barns and bathhouses. Others sidestep this problem by referring to Slavic folklore as "lower mythology."<sup>2</sup> In fact, the gods of the Kievan pantheon, as well as others who appear in later chronicles are conspicuous by their absence in the Russian folklore. In addition, the argument that the Kievan gods are present in Christianized form as saints, fails to address why countless other elements of Russian folklore remain un-Christianized or why Christianity was able to erase every mention of these pagan gods from Slavic folklore but not accomplish the same with the folklore of neighboring Finland or Scandinavia.

In the present thesis, I argue for the recognition of the religions of the Rus' and the Slavs as separate phenomena, which must be sought separately in the chronicles and in the folklore, respectively. Because the Kievan pantheon was a political construct by a

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<sup>2</sup> Linda J. Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief* (Armonk, N.Y. Sharpe, 1989) 68

political power, attempts to reconcile the two cosmologies result in a misleading and unhelpful portrayal of the beliefs of the indigenous Slavs. I demonstrate that when considered independently, both the Rus'ian elements and the Slavic folklore reveal a more cohesive picture of the spiritual reality of the ancient Eastern Slavs and that this picture is not one of classical paganism but one of shamanism resembling the shamanic practices of societies with which the ancient East Slavs were in contact.

The argument for the presence of shamanism in the religious practices of the indigenous Slavs is not a new one but as I will explain, for political reasons was not given any credence. Furthermore, encouragingly, more and more scholarship abandons the comparison of East Slavic mythology to that of ancient Greece. However, the need for new terminology and comparisons seems to leave many competent researchers at a loss for words, or at least, at loss for confidence in their words as they reconsider the role of shamanism in the cosmology of the Slavs. Increasingly, one encounters the terms “shaman” and “shamanic” in various forms. Unfortunately, these are often found in conglomeration with other terms such as “priest/magician/shaman” or in perpetual quotation marks, i.e. “shaman,” suggesting the tentativeness or unproven-ness of the statement. Addressing the same concern in the 1950s, Mircea Eliade states in the first sentence of his book, *Shamanism*:

Since the beginning of the [20th] century, ethnologists have fallen into the habit of using the terms “shaman,” “medicine man,” “sorcerer,” and “magician” interchangeably to designate certain individuals possessing magico-religious powers and found in all “primitive” societies, [...] If the word “shaman” is taken to mean any magician, sorcerer, medicine man, or ecstatic found throughout the

history of religion and religious ethnology, we arrive at a notion at once extremely complex and extremely vague; it seems, furthermore, to serve no purpose, for we already have the terms “magician” or “sorcerer” to express notions as unlike and ill-defined as “primitive magic” or “primitive mysticism.”<sup>3</sup>

After a millennium of Christianity, it is difficult enough to identify truly pagan beliefs, still more so the proposition of distinguishing the beliefs of Rus’ian Slavs from pre-Rus’ian Slavs given the generations of Varangian rule before the adoption of Christianity. However, a reconstruction of ritual or a system of belief is not the goal of this research, but rather to determine, as much as possible, whether a single element, shamanism, was a part of the cosmology of the Slavs of the Kievan State and having demonstrated that, to open up Russian folklore to new interpretation without apologies to generations of attempts to compare it to classical mythology.

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<sup>3</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972) 5

## “Cult of Hysteria”

There is no shortage of research about the religious beliefs of the Eastern Slavs but because a reconstruction of these beliefs is impossible given the absence of firsthand accounts, this scholarship most often takes the form of comparison. Certainly a comparativist approach, though it comes with inherent problems, is unavoidable. However, if managed responsibly this method can nevertheless yield significant understanding. The problem with the majority of the comparativist research on East Slavic religion is that it overwhelmingly looks westward or to classical paganism for its comparisons, neglecting the very plausible influence of cultures with whom the Eastern Slavs were in much more direct contact such as the Finns and the Sami both of which practiced shamanism as well as the Norse whom we now understand to have practiced forms of shamanism as well.

Such comparisons would seem obvious, but for political reasons were seldom considered. The flurry of European folklore research, typified by the Brothers Grimm in Germany, came at a time of incredible grecophilia for the Germans, who considered themselves spiritual and intellectual heirs to classical Greek civilization.<sup>4</sup> In this environment the Russians found themselves in a folklore arms race the goal of which was to create a superior national identity. The fact that Alexander Afanasiev’ who collected

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<sup>4</sup> for more, see Suzanne L. Marchand, *Down From Olympus, Archaeology And Philhellenism In Germany, 1750-1970* (Princeton UP, 2003)

volumes of Russian folklore in the 19th century is known as “the Russian Grimm” is a strong indication of who won.

Any serious German folklore research has since abandoned its comparisons of Valhalla to Olympus, recognizing the tribal nature of its pre-Christian history but by the twentieth century, the relations between Germany and Russia (which had become the Soviet Union) had deteriorated into war. Understandably, the Soviets were uninterested in discovering a heritage of what, up until quite recently, scholarship still referred to as “primitive religion.” Within the Soviet Union, Siberian shamanism was attacked, the practice was declared a mental disorder or a “cult of hysteria”<sup>5</sup> and shamans were even killed by KGB.<sup>6</sup> In such an environment, how could Soviet scholars come to any conclusion, which suggested the most authentically Slavic religion was not that of a pantheon of warrior gods but an ancestor cult filled with nature spirits perhaps sharing many of the shamanic practices of neighboring Finland and Siberia, or even the Sami of the Kola peninsula?

The question of pre-Christian Slavic shamanism is more than a simple curiosity or a historical irony. Because of universal elements in shamanic cosmology and practice, if it can be determined that the indigenous religion of the ancient Slavs was indeed shamanic, it would provide a framework for the interpretation of Russian folklore,

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<sup>5</sup> Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer, *Shamanism: Soviet Studies of Traditional Religion in Siberia and Central Asia* Armonk (NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1990) 3-5

<sup>6</sup> Piers Vitebsky *The Shaman* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995) 137

replacing the misleading classical pagan comparisons which began in the first millennium and persist even to the present.

## The Rus' in "Rus'ia" and the Russians in Russia

One of the first obstacles to an understanding of an indigenous East Slavic religion is the question of the identity of the East Slavs. The matter is confused by the word "Russian" itself, for the Rus' who established the Kievan State were not Slavs but Varangians. The Russian Primary Chronicle (*Povest' vremennykh let*, hereafter *PVL*) presents a story of how, before the founding of the Kievan State, groups of Varangians raided Slavic tribes and forced them to pay tribute until the Slavs revolted and drove away their oppressors. The tribes were ultimately unable to overcome the difficulties of self-rule and according to the *PVL* resolved, "Let us seek a prince who may rule over us and judge us according to the Law," and so sent word to a different group of Varangians, the Rus', "Our land is great and rich but there is no order in it. Come to rule and reign over us."<sup>7</sup>

The name Rus' originally referred to the Viking colonizers of the territory of the East Slavs. It was a name given to the Svear from Central Sweden by their by the Finnish people with whom they traded and was the name used by the Greeks and Arabs to refer to them.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the group of peoples who sent for the Rus' and to whom we now

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<sup>7</sup> Nestor, Samuel Hazzard Cross, and Olgerd P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text* (Cambridge, MA: Medieval Academy of America, 1973) 59

<sup>8</sup> Wladyslaw Duczko, *Viking Rus: Studies on the Presence of Scandinavians in Eastern Europe* (Brill Academic Pub, 2004) 2

refer collectively as “Slavs,” are named individually in the *PVL* as Chuds, Slavs, Merians, Ves’, and Krivichians.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the seemingly clear scenario presented in the *PVL*, beginning in the 18th century and reaching fever pitch in the 19th, debate raged over who got to take credit for the founding of the state of the Eastern Slavs, the Slavs themselves or Scandinavians. Any researcher approaching this topic found himself navigating a veritable minefield of patriotism, nationalism, propaganda, and politics. Opinions on the matter have historically been polarized into a “Normanistic” camp arguing a Scandinavian colonization of the Slavs and “Anti-Normanistic” camp, which argued that the Rus’ were not Varangians but also Slavs. Many Slav scholars were unwilling to concede the role of non-Slav peoples in the founding of the Eastern Slavic state including the 18th century scholar, Mikhail Lomonosov, who argued against the findings of German pro-Normanist researchers working in Russia and the 19th century Russian scholars who attacked Vilhelm Thomsen’s presentation of his evidence of Scandinavian presence in the Kievan State. More recently Stalinist, Great Russian chauvinism and post-communist nationalism contribute to the conflict.<sup>10</sup> Even those Slav scholars whose research may have supported a conclusion of Scandinavian colonization would no doubt have found it personally and politically difficult to agree with the “Normanist” camp whose rhetoric could be as inflammatory as Hitler’s infamous remark that, “Unless other peoples, beginning with the

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<sup>9</sup> Nestor, Cross, Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 65

<sup>10</sup> Duczko 4

Vikings, had imported some rudiments of organization into Russian humanity, the Russians would still be living like rabbits.”<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the debate about the founding of the East Slavic state must be understood against the backdrop of the wholesale dismissal of Slavs in European culture exemplified in Hegel’s statement:

Sie [die Slaven] müssen aus unserer Betrachtung bleiben, weil sie ein Mittelwesen zwischen europäischem und asiatischem Geist bilden und weil ihr Einfluss auf den Stufengang des Geistes nicht tätig und wichtig genug ist.<sup>12</sup>

These indigenous Slavs were not Rus’, and they were Rus’ians only insofar as they were the vassals in a land named for its foreign rulers. Archeological evidence from burial sites in the region makes it clear that there were a great many more Svear-Rus’ in the Kievan state than the members of a single princely family. The Kievan State was colonized by Scandinavians.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, in order to speak of pre-Christian religion in what is now Russia, we must undertake to identify the pagan religion represented in early chronicles as being that of the Rus’ and not that of the Slavs. It is highly unlikely that the various tribes of the Eastern Slavs shared a unified cosmology among themselves: “Ein einheitliches

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Duczko 4

<sup>12</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Wolfgang Bonsiepen, and Hans-Christian Lucas. *Enzyklopädie Der Philosophischen Wissenschaften Im Grundrisse: (1827)*. (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verl., 1989) XI, 447

<sup>13</sup> Duczko 5

altrussisches Heidentum ist ebenso wie eine sog. ‘slavische Mythologie’ eine gelehrte Fiktion,”<sup>14</sup> and even more unlikely that they shared one with the colonizing Rus’.

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<sup>14</sup> Edgar Hösch, “Das altrussische Heidentum” in: Gerhard Birkfellner, *Millennium Russiae Christianae: 988-1988 : Tausend Jahre Christliches Rusland : Vorträge Des Symposiums* (Köln: Böhlau, 1993) 106

## “Idols on the Hills” and Other Gods

The foci of most research of Slavic paganism are references to pagan gods, mostly in Slavic Christian chronicles, lamenting the ignorant idolatry of the pre-Christian Slavs. The oldest extant Slavic text naming any of the pre-Christian deities is the *PVL*, probably written in about 1113,<sup>15</sup> which contains the earliest reference to the list of gods who are now collectively referred to as the “Kievan idols.”

Vladimir then began to reign alone in Kiev, and set up idols on the hills outside the castle with the hall: one of Perun, made of wood with a head of silver and a mustache of gold, and others of Khors, of Dazh’bog, Stribog, Simar’gl, and Mokosh’. The people sacrificed to them, calling them gods, and brought their sons and their daughters to sacrifice them to these devils. They desecrated the earth with their offerings and the land of Rus’ and these hills were defiled with blood. But our gracious God desires not the death of sinners, and upon this hill now stands a church dedicated to Saint Basil, as we shall later narrate.<sup>16</sup>

The story of the Kievan idols however, is not the first mention of pagan gods in the *PVL*. One god, Volos, notably absent from the Kievan pantheon, is mentioned together with Perun a number of times as one of the two gods by whom the Rus’ swore their oaths. In recounting an earlier history of a treaty between the Rus’ and the Greeks, the chronicler writes, “According to the religion of the Russes, the latter [Oleg and his men] swore by their weapons and by their god Perun, as well as by Volos, the god of cattle, and thus confirmed the treaty.”<sup>17</sup> The Slavs are mentioned in this chronicle entry

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<sup>15</sup> Nestor, Cross, Sherbowitz-Wetzor 21

<sup>16</sup> Nestor, Cross, Sherbowitz-Wetzor 95

<sup>17</sup> Nestor, Cross, Sherbowitz-Wetzor 65

but no mention is made of their gods nor is it stated that a separate oath from them was necessary in order to confirm the treaty.

The next text to describe East Slavic gods in any detail beyond the description in the *PVL* was the *Hustyn Chronicle* written sometime in the early 17th century. A side by side comparison of the *Hustyn Chronicle* and Marcin Błażowski's heavily interpolated, 1611 translation of Kromer's *De origine et rebus gestis Polonorum*, suggests that the author of the *Hustyn Chronicle* was citing Kromer.<sup>18</sup> The *Hustyn Chronicle* represents the earliest extant mention of a god called *Pozvzd*:

The third [i.e. god] was Pozvzd, whom the Poles called Poxvist. They believed him to be the god of *aer*, that is air, others of good and bad weather, still others called him the whirlwind; and to this Pozvzd or whirlwind they bowed and prayed to as to god.<sup>19</sup>

In the case of *Pozvzd*, there does seem to be some historical basis. However, this is not always the case. Many so-called Slavic gods may never have been gods at all. In her book, *The Gods of the Ancient Slavs*, Myroslava Znayenko states, "The accounts of the two old Ukrainian gods *Kupalo* and *Koljada* have no apparent source either in Eastern Slavic or Polish chronicles." and further comments that she has seen no mention of these gods which predates the 18th century writing of the *Hustyn Chronicle*.<sup>20</sup> Numerous other gods have been mentioned or postulated such as *Rod*, *Iarilo*, *Lada*, *Lel* and *Polel*. Some

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<sup>18</sup> Myroslava Znayenko, *The Gods of the Ancient Slavs: Tatishchev and the Beginnings of Slavic Mythology* (Columbus, OH: Slavica, 1980) 16

<sup>19</sup> Znayenko 18

<sup>20</sup> Znayenko 18

of these names are taken from medieval chronicles; some were taken from the refrains of songs and may in fact be no more than nonsense words.

## The Nature of the Gods

In their search for Slavic gods, writers like Vasily Nikitich Tatishchev, himself a male-line descendent of 9th century Prince Rurik, have drawn on ancient sources like Procopius, or foreign sources such as Kromer's *De origine et rebus gestis Polonorum*. These chroniclers were Christians who could read and write Greek and Latin and were searching for a provenance for the Slavic gods that resembled the Greek and Roman formulae with which they were familiar. It is altogether possible that they ignored an active pagan culture because it did not resemble the classical model they were seeking to recreate. At the time of the writing of these chronicles there were only two literarily acceptable religious paradigms, Christianity and classical paganism. Anything which did not fit one or the other was simply superstition or heresy, and therefore not worth including in the chronicle. In reality, there were probably at least as many panthea as there were Slavic tribes. "The heathen tribal cults that formed the religion of the Slavs of this time and in fact varied from region to region in their level of development are not mentioned."<sup>21</sup>

This search for provenance for the Slavic gods often begins with a reference in *De Bello Gothico*, by the sixth century Byzantine historian, Procopius of Cesarea. There he states in reference to the early South Slavic tribes of the Antes and Sclaveni, "they

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<sup>21</sup> Jukka Korpela, *Prince, Saint, And Apostle, Prince Vladimir Svjatoslavič Of Kiev, His Posthumous Life, And The Religious Legitimization Of The Russian Great Power* (Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 2001) 64

believed that one god, the maker of lightening, is alone lord of all things and they sacrifice to him cattle and all other victims.” However, this god is not named. It is possible that some version of *Perkwunos*, the Indo-European god of thunder, is meant here but it is misleading to disregard the intervening 600 years between the accounts in *De Bello Gothico* and the *PVL* and simply assume that this god can be understood as the Kievan Perun. It is further misleading to assume that a Byzantine historian’s account would not be colored by his own cosmology. It is doubtful that the ancient historian would have a frame of reference for any system of belief other than his own.

## Arrival of the Gospel

The *PVL* presents a narrative of a barbarous pagan society in which Vladimir rejects paganism for himself and his people, heroically brings in Christianity, and sternly demands the conversion of his people with a mass baptism. Vladimir, we are told, ordered that some of the idols be cut to pieces, others burned, but Perun was to be tied to a horse's tailed and dragged through the streets to the Dnepr while twelve men beat the idol with sticks, "not because he thought the idol was sensitive, but to affront the demon who had deceived men in this guise, that he might receive chastisement at the hands of men." The unbelievers (pagans) wept, and the devil "groaned, lamenting:

Woe is me! how I am driven hence! For I thought to have my dwelling-place here, since the apostolic teachings do not abide in this land. Nor did this people know God, but I rejoiced in the service they rendered unto me. But now I am vanquished by the ignorant, not by the apostles and martyrs, and my reign in these regions is at an end.<sup>22</sup>

Such a narrative has the effect of assigning a historical moment to the process of Christianization, which began before Vladimir and was ongoing at the time of the writing of the *PVL*. However, this picture of the Christianization of the Kievan State is simply not true. Vladimir did not introduce Christianity to the Rus'. In his book, *Theologie der Kiever Rus'*, Podskalsky assures us that Olga was baptized in Kiev not Constantinople in 955 and traveled to imperial court in Byzantium in the company of a priest.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Nestor, Cross, Sherbowitz-Wetzor 116-117

<sup>23</sup> Gerhard Podskalsky, *Theologie Der Kiever Rus'* (C.H.Beck, 1982) 16

“It is probably only to the extent that when the prince decided to convert to Christianity, as the temporal and spiritual leader of his people he also decided for his people.”<sup>24</sup>

A mass baptism is a story which appears in the Christianization not only of the Rus’ians but also of many other medieval nations too, like Armenians, Finns, Franks, Northumbrians, Saxons, and others. The background is clearly the allegorical implication of the Baptism of Jordan (Mc 1,4-1,11) that a mass baptism was the model for all baptism.<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, a number of its claims and traditional beliefs about its narrative are best understood in the context in which they were written, namely, by a Christian chronicler working in the court of Sviatopolk II of Kiev in the year 1113 recounting events, which took place more than a hundred years earlier. The account in the *PVL* of the Christianization of Kiev was only ever intended to be the story of Christianity’s victory over the Devil.

In the *PVL* the Devil laments being driven out of Kiev. This account begins and ends with an assumption that the cosmology of the ancient Rus’ and possibly of the ancient Slavs as well could be understood within the Christian context. The primary function of the conversion narrative in the *PVL* is to present a decisive victory of Christianity over the Devil. Because of the nature of Christian cosmology, there is only one foe of the Christian Church. Any god who is not God can only be the Devil in some guise. Thus, regardless of how the ancient Rus’ and Slavs understood the nature of their gods, when these beliefs were supplanted by Christianity the old beliefs could only be

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<sup>24</sup> Korpela 65

<sup>25</sup> Korpela 64-5

understood as a deception authored by the Prince of Lies, the one villain available within its system of belief.

Once the Kievan gods, or any other pagan gods for that matter, were rejected in favor of the Christian God, not only were they vilified, but the cosmological context in which they existed was abandoned. This is a function of conversion to monotheism. If there is only one God, then it follows that there is only one cosmology. The *PVL* could not tell the same story of Christianity's victory over an ancestor or hunting cult in the Kievan state because it is inconceivable within Christian cosmology. What is more, we must not assume that Perun's particular humiliation at the hands of the recent converts is a reflection of his importance within the cosmology to which he originally belonged. If such is the case, it is incidental to the fact that a male false god was necessary to play the role of the Devil in the retelling of a battle, which for the purposes of the chronicle, had already been won. The conversion narrative in the *PVL* is told entirely within the Christian context.

To the extent that we accept the colonization of the Slavs by the Rus', we must accept that the account in the *PVL* of the Christianization is a chronicle of the Rus', not necessarily the Slavs, and that if we accept that Vladimir was Scandinavian Rus' and that his historical role was the creation of an Eastern Slavic state by uniting the people of the Kievan state under a common religion whether by force or simply by the virtue of his own conversion, we must consider that the Kievan idols represent a first attempt, prior to the adoption of Christianity, to accomplish the same end. It is no more than an

assumption based on a single account, that the gods named in the *PVL* ever coexisted in a natural cosmology. It is likely that just as Vladimir and the Rus' who were Scandinavian, ruled over Slavs in the Kievan state, that Perun, the only Kievan god mentioned in foreign accounts of the Rus', was a Scandinavian god who was made to rule over the lesser, Slavic gods in an artificially constructed Kievan pantheon. Jukka Korpela states, "I should like to point out that the supreme god of Vladimir's pantheon, Perun, was not a well-known deity among the Slavs."<sup>26</sup> Perun is mentioned exclusively in connection to the Rus', not the Slavs in all but the account of the Kievan idols. If we abandon the assertion that the Rus' were Slavs, we must also admit that their gods were not Slavic.

The effect of a state religion on the creation of a state identity is clear from the history of the Christianization of the Rus' and the Eastern Slavs as it is from numerous other cultures. That Vladimir was responsible for both erecting and toppling the Kievan idols before converting to Christianity indicates that Christianity was not his first attempt at the creation of a state religion. However, one cannot convert from polytheism to polytheism. By its very nature, polytheism does not deny gods and so, would not object to the addition of new gods.<sup>27</sup> Thus, by placing Rus'ian and Slavic gods together in one pantheon, Vladimir was not able to achieve the effect of a new, unifying religion but merely to reflect the polytheistic reality that in a society of Rus' and Slavs, both Rus'ian and Slavic gods were honored. As a state religion with the goal of unifying different

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<sup>26</sup> Korpela 64

<sup>27</sup> Korpela 62

peoples, this kind of polytheism must fail since there is no motivation for one group to embrace the gods of another, only to acknowledge them. The interaction of the two religions would have been in a paradigm of local gods versus foreign gods or stronger gods versus weaker gods. It was not until Christian influence that the paradigm of true god versus false god was introduced.

## Oral Tradition

The Norse sagas were preserved orally long after the Christianization of Scandinavia. The Prose Edda was recorded by Snorri Sturluson in the 13th century and the Poetic Edda about 50 years later, some 200 years after the Christianization of Iceland in the year 1000. The Kalevala was not compiled until the first decades of the 19th century, 700 years after the Christianization of Finland in the 11th through the 13th centuries.

It is reasonable to assume that in the same way that the folklore of Finland and Scandinavia preserved their pre-Christian gods, the gods of the ancient Eastern Slavs are also present in their folklore. The argument that the Christian Church could eradicate the names and memory of the pre-Christian gods in the Eastern Slavic world is insupportable when it has failed to do so anywhere else in Europe, particularly when so many pagan beliefs and festivals survive in the same culture.

Neither the Eddas nor the Kalevala existed in epic form before they were collected but existed as individual hero-tales, like the *byliny* of Russian folklore. Elias Lönnrot published his first version of the Kalevala in 1835, a mere twenty years before Alexander Afanasiev began publishing his collections of Russian fairytales.<sup>28</sup> The fact that there is no Slavic mythological epic is not because the tales do not exist, but rather because the Russians do not regard their folklore as such.

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<sup>28</sup> Alexander Nikolayevich Afanasyev, *Poeticheskiye vozzreniya slavyan na prirodu*, 3 vols. (Moscow: K. Soldatenko, 1865-1869)

## **A Real Slavic God**

The possibility of pre-Christian Slavic shamanism does not preclude the belief in a distinctly Slavic cosmology. Nor does it rule out individual Slavic deities. Clearly, the ancient Eastern Slavs did have gods in which they believed and their own ways of interacting with them. Slavic shamanism would however, have bearing on the way in which the indigenous Slavs interacted with their gods. It is perhaps the term “god” itself which most impedes an understanding of ancient Slavic cosmology and the practice of historians –ancient and modern– to compare the Slavic gods to Greek and Roman gods, which best illustrates the need for a different cosmological paradigm:

A very interesting detail is that the Christian chronicles described the old heathen religion in the framework of the Greco-Roman classical religion. They constructed a supreme god after the model of Zeus/Jupiter and put all the others in a corresponding hierarchy. Even if the original heathen cults and their concepts of god differed greatly from the ancient Greco-Roman-Christian concept of the personified gods, they destroyed, split and remodeled their original cults and myths and reconstructed an Olympus, as Snorri Sturluson described the Scandinavian religion in the form of the state of Asa.<sup>29</sup>

The concept of what constitutes a god is far from universal as is the idea of a realm of the gods and the gods’ roles in human affairs. Eliade, in commenting on the different religious orientation in the shamanic societies of the Arctic, Siberia, and Central Asia, where shamanism has “reached its most advanced degrees of integration,” notes the scarcely felt presence of a Celestial God in relation to the importance of ancestor and hunting cults. We must not assume that the ancient Eastern Slavs anthropomorphized

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<sup>29</sup> Korpela 63-4

their gods nor can we assume that the creator god(s) was not a *deus otiosus* (idle god) or a *deus absconditus* (hidden god). Indeed, the god who is responsible for creation of the world may be separate from the god who is responsible for the creation of man and as such, may be relegated to little or no more than a character in the creation story. So too may the fate of man be of no further interest to his creator. With his or her work finished, the bulk of religious practice may well involve deities or spirits such as ancestors responsible for more immediate concerns, such as birth, death, the harvest and the hunt. That Procopius' South Slavs recognized a thunder god, for example, does not mean that he bore any resemblance to Thor or even to the Kievan Perun with a silver beard and a gold mustache let alone that he or Perun was of particular significance before his humiliation in the conversion narrative presented in the *PVL*.

Tatishchev writes, "About Russian idolatry Nestor, in tracing the origins of nations, says about the Slavs that they worshiped the sun, the moon, fire, lakes, wells and groves as their gods." Not only does this description of Slavic cosmology more clearly resemble shamanism than classical paganism, but it also seems to acknowledge Rus'ian religion and Slavic religion as distinct from one another. Although, as Myroslava Znayenko explains, Tatishchev seems here to have drawn on personal knowledge or misattributed this information to Nestor, as this reference does not occur in any of the extant versions of the *PVL*.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Znayenko 62

In the same way that Norse, and Finnic folklores provide the basis for our understanding of their respective pre-Christian religions, we must look to East Slavic folklore for some understanding of the indigenous religion of the Eastern Slavs. With Perun and Volos removed from consideration as foreign gods, and in the absence of any chronicle descriptions of *Khors*, *Dazh'bog*, *Stribog*, *Simar'gl*, or *Mokosh'*, rather than continuing to force a comparison with the mythologies of distant Greece or Rome, I propose to look to the Sami of Northern Europe for comparison because their proximity and the antiquity of their system of belief. The Sami are an indigenous, traditionally shamanic people, whose limited population even today ranges into the Kola Peninsula,<sup>31</sup> the location of Novgorod, one of Rurik's original three Rus' settlements.<sup>32</sup>

The Sami believe in an upper world of the gods, a middle world occupied by human beings and an upside-down world of the dead. "These realms, although discrete, with well-defined occupants and a distinct locus often interact or manifest themselves in the human realm."<sup>33</sup> In Sami society, one of the roles of the shaman or noaide is to mediate these interactions. Concerning the nature of the Sami gods, Rafael Karsten writes:

The task of the god or *seidi* was to help the Lapp in the hard struggle for existence; if he was not able to do it he was worth nothing. An unhelpful god is no

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<sup>31</sup> Rafael Karsten, *The Religion of the Samek: Ancient Beliefs and Cults of the Scandinavian and Finnish Lapps* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1955) 4-5

<sup>32</sup> Duczko 10

<sup>33</sup> Mihály Hoppál "Shamanism: An Archaic and/or Recent Belief System" *Shamanism* Ed. Shirley Nicholson (Wheaton: Quest 1987) 89

god at all and there is no reason to worship him. Sacrifices were offered to him according to the principle “do ut des” (I give in order that you may give).<sup>34</sup>

In such a cosmology, the gods who sustain humanity quickly become more important than the gods responsible for its creation if they are not one and the same.

*Laib olmai*, the forest god of the Sami whose name means “alder man,” ruled over all forest animals, which were regarded as his herds. The success or failure of the hunt depended on him. As such, there is an obvious similarity between *Laib olmai* of the Sami and the Russian *leshii*. Like *Laib olmai*, the *leshii* was regarded as a shepherd of the forest, responsible for the wildlife. While it is a break with convention to suggest that the *leshii* belongs in the indigenous East Slavic pantheon -and indeed, as long as one forces the comparison with Greek mythology, the *leshii* makes for an awkward addition to an Olympus- within the shamanic cosmology of the Sami of the same region however, the *leshii* behaves very much like a god. The following is a *zagovor*, a charm or spell, directed at the *leshii* and other nature gods:

I write to the tsar of the forest, the tsaritsa of the forest, and their little children; to the tsar of the earth... to the tsar of the water... I inform you that servant of God X has lost a [black, brown, etc.] horse [or cow, etc.] If it should be found in your realm, send it back without delaying an hour, a minute, a second. And if you do not I shall appeal to the megalomartyr George and Tsaritsa Aleksandra.<sup>35</sup>

Though the Christian influence is clear, the carefulness of the letter, which is to be written right to left in triplicate and nailed to a tree, buried under ground and thrown into a late

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<sup>34</sup> Karsten 123

<sup>35</sup> W. F. Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight: an Historical Survey of Magic and Divination in Russia* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 1999) 198

(i.e. hand delivered to the realms of each of the respective gods) and the fact that the spirits are referred to as tsars (compare to “grandfather,” the euphemistic title of the *domovoi*) indicate the reverence and fear with which these spirits were regarded.

In addition to accounts in which the *leshii* herds or runs with packs of wolves, himself having assumed the form of a large white wolf,<sup>36</sup> there are accounts in which the *leshii* also appears as a man, a giant, a horse, or a whirlwind<sup>37</sup> like *Poxvist*, one of the major “Russian” gods of the *Hustyn Chronicle*:

I would say again that Pochwisciel was a wind or a whistling whirlwind... I think however, that not only the Mazovians, but the Rus’ as well praised this Pochwisciel... since we know that until today the simple people of Rus’ Ukraine each time they see this whirlwind before their eyes always bow their heads, giving him praise...<sup>38</sup>

However, as Znayenko demonstrates in her book, *The Gods of the Ancient Slavs*, the identification of the whirlwind with *Pochwisciel* is an addition of Błażowski’s and is not included in Kromer’s original. Here Błażowski has connected “the simple people of Rus’ Ukraine” bowing their heads to the whirlwind, a phenomenon with which he assumes the reader is familiar, with Pochwisciel, a god with whom he assumes the reader is not familiar. It is likely Błażowski’s reference to the Rus’ Ukraine that inspired the author of

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<sup>36</sup> Ivanits 68

<sup>37</sup> Ryan 44

<sup>38</sup> Znayenko 18

the *Hustyn Chronicle* to include *Poxvist* as a major “Russian” god, even though he is not mentioned in any earlier Russian sources.<sup>39</sup>

In a system of belief so given to euphemism it is probably impossible to determine whether *leshii* and *Poxvist* are or were ever one and the same, but we may recognize that the whirlwind, in which form the *leshii* was known to appear, was honored as the manifestation of one of the Slavic gods whether major or not. As demonstrated by the epithet, “tsar of the forest,” the veneration of the whirlwind is not the only indicator of reverence for the *leshii*. Furthermore, there are examples of rituals to summon the *leshii* in order to enter into pact with him as well examples of prayers and offerings to the *leshii*,<sup>40</sup> himself capable of killing or granting safe passage through his forest realm, granting helper spirits, or even magical powers. The *leshii*, “He himself,” the “tsar” of the forest, sometimes as tall as a large bell tower,<sup>41</sup> sometimes a whirlwind, and sometimes a great white wolf is miscast as a “wood-sprite” and belongs to an altogether different class of mythico-religious figure than the *domovoi*. Like the *Laib olmai*, he was a forest god.

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<sup>39</sup> Znayenko, 18

<sup>40</sup> Ivanits 65-68

<sup>41</sup> Ivanits 43

## **“Grandfather Domovoi!” A Case for an Ancestor Cult**

Well into the 19th century, Russia preserved folk traditions focused on death and the dead. In parts of Russia, many of these practices continue, even up to the present day. At Yuletide, mock funerals were held in which someone pretending to be dead was grieved amidst laughter and merriment. Shrovetide, also known as *Maslenitsa* was another occasion for wailing and laughter. Parts of this celebration were held in the cemetery where a meal was shared with the deceased. *Radunitsa* also was a great joyous celebration dominated by funeral motifs. During *Radunitsa* eggs were left in the cemetery for the deceased. On the Thursday of *Rusalnaia* week, called *semik*, seven or sometimes eight weeks after Easter, actual funerals were held for those who had not yet received a proper burial.<sup>42</sup>

Again, I turn to traditional Sami religion for comparison, which has a well-established and thoroughly developed role for the dead in its cosmology. In the same way that the term “god” must be reexamined in the context of shamanic religions, so too must we exercise caution in the use of the phrase “ancestor worship.” For this reason, I use the less misleading phrase, “ancestor cult.” Though there is some question about the influence of Scandinavian culture, both pagan and later Christian, on the cosmology of the Sami, early documentation of Sami paganism records the belief in a land of the dead, *Saivo*, which is believed to be located underground near the earth’s surface, and an

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<sup>42</sup> Ivanits 9-10

additional realm *Jabmeaimo*, known to the Norwegian Sami, which is believed to be further down.<sup>43</sup> It is suspected that *Jabmeaimo*, described as dark and gloomy and which is ruled over by *Jamiakka*, the Queen of Death, may be influenced by Scandinavian paganism, Christianity or both. The word *saivo* however, is used to refer not only to the realm of the dead, but also to the sacred lakes and mountains as well as the spirits of deceased *noidi* (shamans) who dwelled there. These were among the spirits who served as the helper or tutelary spirits for the living shaman.

As in Russian folk culture there was considerable taboo surrounding death and the dead among the Sami. When a body was shrouded, care had to be taken to completely cover the entire body lest the soul escape. The fear that the dead would haunt the living was very real among the Sami. Special care had to be taken to bury the dead in a suitable place for burial, a concern also keenly felt in Russian folk culture in the idea of the “unclean dead.” “These included great sinners and all who died premature or violent deaths (sorcerers and witches, suicides, murder victims, drunks, unchristened and stillborn children).”<sup>44</sup>

The importance of the distinction between ancestor worship and ancestor cult is present in both the cases of the Slavs and the Sami. It is true that Sami made both blood sacrifices of reindeer and bloodless offerings to the dead, because they were considered responsible for certain diseases, this practice may have been intended more to appease

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<sup>43</sup> Karsten 106-7

<sup>44</sup> Ivanits 47-8

than to venerate. It was believed that the souls missed the company their relatives departed and also that they might wish to punish the living for their misdeeds.<sup>45</sup> Likewise in their relationship with the *domovoi* and other similar familial spirits, the Slavs are often concerned with preventing chastisement from disgruntled dead.

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<sup>45</sup> Karsten 111

## Shamanism and Paganism

Shamanism and paganism are not mutually exclusive. The mere presence of a shaman in a society does not necessarily mean "...that the magico-religious life of that society is crystallized around the shaman. [...] Generally shamanism coexists with other forms of magic and religion."<sup>46</sup> Furthermore:

...wherever the immediate fate of the soul is not at issue, wherever there is no question of sickness (= loss of soul) or death, or misfortune, or of a great sacrificial rite involving some ecstatic experience (mystical journey to the sky or to the underworld), the shaman is not indispensable. A large part of religious life takes place without him.<sup>47</sup>

The term "pagan," like the term "shaman," has acquired a number of connotations in popular usage. However, it does not refer to any specific religion or system of beliefs. Often the term is used in reference to any non-Abrahamic religion. A related but narrower use of the term applies to any pre-Christian religion of Europe. Still another use of the term is in reference to any ethnic religion.

The indigenous religion of the Eastern Slavs fit all of these definitions and yet the designation of the Eastern Slavs as "pagan" here says nothing of the nature of the practice religion beyond the fact that it was not Jewish, Christian, or Islamic. The use of the term shaman, however, is more restrictive.

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<sup>46</sup> Eliade, *Shamanism* 5

<sup>47</sup> Eliade, *Shamanism* 8

Shamanism is a practice. A shaman is a religious figure within a given system of belief but not every individual who subscribes to that system of belief is a shaman. One may understand the role of the shaman in relation to shamanism as analogous to the role of the priest in relation to priesthood. Here we can see that the term itself is problematic having come to be understood as describing a religion. It does not. This has led Piers Vitebsky to offer that shamanism is not an “ism” at all, but rather better understood as a “ry” like carpentry or dentistry.<sup>48</sup> “Shamanry,” as Vitebsky would have it, has the benefit of disambiguating the practice of “techniques of ecstasy” from the cosmology in which they are practiced. Thus the shaman is an individual who practices “shamanry” (or shamanizes) within a shamanic cosmology (shamanism) just as a priest acts out his priesthood in a “priestic” cosmology. The difference between the two is first and foremost one of clientele. Where the role of a priest in his priesthood is to convey the desires of his clientele, the god or gods, to the people of his society, the role of the shaman is to convey the desires of the people, who are his clientele, to the gods. This makes the vocation of “shamanry” infinitely more perilous than that of priesthood. To continue the analogy of clientele, a shaman, who works for the people may be relieved of his duties (or killed) if he fails to gain for his society the desired results. A priest however, works for the gods. The paradigmatic difference is clear. This entire dynamic is illustrated in a sermon by bishop Serapion writing in the 1270s (see section on *volkhvy* below) in which he chastises his congregation not only for believing in the powers of the *volkhvy* but for

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<sup>48</sup> Piers Vitebsky, *The Shaman* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995) 161

killing them in times of crop failure.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, the office of priesthood relies on religion, institutionalized to some degree. A shaman, however, interacts directly with the spiritual world. In other words, one is a priest because one is ordained into priesthood. One is a shaman because one shamanizes. Thus a pre-Christian Slavic paganism after the Greek model presupposes an institutional religion.

There are nevertheless, a few central unifying cosmological elements among shamanic religions. Many, if not all of these features relate directly to the technique of ecstasy employed by the shaman to travel to the realm of the gods or of the dead where he or she learns from, forms allegiances with, or battles spirits. Those spirits that aid the shaman are called tutelary or helper spirits and can be demons (i.e. monstrous non-anthropomorphic spirits), animal spirits, or the spirits of ancestors (particularly those of dead shamans).<sup>50</sup> It is his relationship with these spirits that gives the shaman his power to help or to harm. An ecstatic with no helper spirits is not a shaman. Finally, some concept of the *axis mundi*, a spiritual path connecting the three worlds seems to be common to all expressions of shamanism. This central pillar of the worlds may find expression as an actual pillar such as the Germanic *Irmingsul*,<sup>51</sup> but may also be the central pole of a tent, or something much less literal like the World Tree or a volcano. The *axis*

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<sup>49</sup> E. V. Petukhov, *Serapion Vladimirskii, russkii propovednik XIII veka* (St. Petersburg: Tip. Imp. Akademii Nauk, 1888) 11-13

<sup>50</sup> Eliade, *Shamanism* 6

<sup>51</sup> Eliade, *Shamanism* 263

*mundi* is defined by its function, not its form, and as such may find expression with anything that serves as the shaman's path between the worlds.

## Volkhvy: Wolf Shamans, or “Crones Reviled of God?”

The earliest Old Church Slavonic and Old Russian texts refer to pagan magico-religious figures as *volkhvy*. As the earliest attested Russian magician, a complete portrait of the *volkhv* is not possible, but a few facts are known about him. The *volkhv* is assumed to have been the central religious figure of indigenous Slavic paganism, although his specific role in ritual is not clear. If we take Church rhetoric against pre-Christian belief as a gauge for what was probably believed and practiced, then a thirteenth century sermon by bishop Serapion of Vladimir admonishing his congregation not to believe in specific powers of the *volkhvy* would lead us to believe that they were thought to have the power to make crops bountiful or to fail, and that they also generally had power over the weather to bring about rain or warmth. In the same sermon the bishop also rebukes the congregants for murdering the *volkhvy* during times of crop failure. In addition, it is clear from religious writings against the *volkhvy*, that they were consulted for divination, healing, and fertility.<sup>52</sup>

Civil records point to the *volkhvy* as leaders in popular uprisings, which usually ended in the *volkhv* being put to death.<sup>53</sup> One such episode occurs in the *PVL* in an account describing the resistance to Christianization.<sup>54</sup> In that particular story two *volkhvy* are chased for some time through the woods before finally being caught and put to death.

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<sup>52</sup> Ivanits 86

<sup>53</sup> Ivanits 87

<sup>54</sup> Nestor, Cross, Sherbowitz-Wetzor 151

It is clear that there were men who were religious and social leaders in ancient Slavic society, but not all of them and perhaps none of them were called “*volkhvy*.” In addition to the word “*volkhvy*,” the oldest chronicles record others: *kudesnik*, *charodeevyi*, *starets*, *obavnik*, as well as the word *zhrets* which is usually used to refer to pagan priests.

We must not assume that the ratio of male grammatical forms in the Christian chronicles corresponds to the numbers of male religious figures who were present in pre-Christian Slavic society. We must further refrain from assuming that because there are grammatical female forms, there must also have been female practitioners. While it is the *PVL* which gives us many these terms, it is also the chronicle which states:

Particularly through the agency of women are infernal enchantments brought to pass, for in the beginning the devil deceived woman, and she in turn deceived man. Thus even down to the present day women perform magic by black arts, poison and other devilish deceits.<sup>55</sup>

In later writings and folk tradition a distinction is clear. In the 17th century Patriarch Nikon forbids prophetic practices of “crones reviled of God” and the stories of were-wolf sorcerers seem to be associated exclusively with men. It is possible that among the ancient Eastern Slavs as with the Norse (discussed below) there were distinct male and female cults of magic. The evidence certainly seems to support a more careful inquiry into which specific magical practices are associated with which practitioners.

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<sup>55</sup> Nestor, Cross, Sherbowitz-Wetzor 153

## Shaman and Helper Spirits

In his definition of shamanism, Mihály Hoppál does little to modify Eliade's, beyond foregrounding the importance of the helper spirits in the shaman's role:

Shamanism is a complex system of beliefs which includes the knowledge of and the belief in the names of helper spirits in the shamanic pantheon, the memory of certain texts (sermons, shaman-songs, legends, myths, etc.) the rules for activities (rituals, sacrifices, the technique of ecstasy, etc.), and the objects, tools and paraphernalia used by shamans (drum, stick, bow, mirror, costumes, etc.) [...] On the basis of beliefs, the members of a given community believe that shamans are able to get in touch with spirits for different purposes (healing, prophesying) or to take a journey to the underworld in a state of trance with the help of a rhythmical background music (drum or other instrument), or hallucinogenic agents in order to contact the deceased.<sup>56</sup>

Among the Sami, as is typical of shamanic culture, the power of the *noidi* (shamans) was determined by the number of *saivo-gadze* (guardian spirits) they had in their service. The more they had, the more powerful they were believed to be. These tutelary or guardian spirits instructed the *noidi* in all of their shamanic arts, being thus both master and servant to the *noidi*.

There are numerous instances in the Russian folklore in which a sorcerer makes use of a helper spirit. Some stories tell of an "alien" *domovoi* being sent by a sorcerer or witch to cause a peasant bad luck with his animals.<sup>57</sup> In others the *domovoi* is summoned to serve as an oracle.<sup>58</sup> However, the nature of the helper spirit is not always clear, as for

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<sup>56</sup> Hoppál 95

<sup>57</sup> Ivanits 56, 68

<sup>58</sup> Ryan 71

example in the late 17th century Tale of the Possessed Woman Solomoniia in which a *potvornik volkhv* sends a “demon” to torment her.<sup>59</sup>

The shaman’s relationship with the helper spirit and the helper spirit’s relationship with the shaman are mutually defining. Thus, given the relationship of the *domovoi* to a home and its family, it may be that the *bannik* and not the *domovoi* was the original helper spirit of the Slavic shaman since the *koldun* (the word begins to be used in chronicles about the time that *volkhv* falls out of use in the 16th and 17th centuries) was known to break taboos by entering the bathhouse alone while everyone else was at church but apparently not for the purposes of bathing.<sup>60</sup> It is possible that the Slavic shaman’s communing with his helper spirits in the bathhouse are what gave rise to many of the bathhouse taboos in the first place.

Not only the presence of the helper spirit, but also but also the negotiation of the relationship and the shaman’s ongoing obligations to his helper spirits are significant. In some societies the relationship with a helper spirit is sealed with an offering of the shaman’s flesh and blood in an ecstatic vision during his or her initiatory dismemberment (discussed below). Sometimes they are fed on the blood which a shaman sucks from the wounds of those he heals.<sup>61</sup> The Christianized Russian folklore most often provides for the *volkhv* or *koldun* gaining the allegiance of these (evil) spirits through acts of

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<sup>59</sup> W. F. Ryan, 71

<sup>60</sup> W. F. Ryan, 50

<sup>61</sup> Eliade, *Shamanism* 106

blasphemy against the Christian God and His Church such as taking off one's crucifix and grinding it under heel, shooting a piece of communion bread, or standing on an icon at a cross roads and "reviling God."<sup>62</sup> Such beliefs however, rely on Christian cosmology and as such could not have been a part of pre-Christian practice.

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<sup>62</sup> Ryan 73

## Techniques of Ecstasy and “Accursed Whirling Dances”

Since publication of Mircea Eliade’s book, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, the definition of shamanism he put forth has been central to descriptions of the phenomenon. In order to distinguish shamanism from other forms of mysticism, Eliade identifies two criteria:

However selected, a shaman is not recognized as such until after he has received two kinds of teaching: (1) ecstatic (dreams, trances etc.) and (2) traditional (shamanic techniques, names and functions of the spirits, mythology and genealogy of the clan, secret language, etc.) This twofold course of instruction given by the spirits and the old master shamans is equivalent to an initiation.<sup>63</sup>

While the *koldun* and the *znakhar* have learned traditional techniques from other practitioners, this alone does not constitute a practice shamanism. The question remains as to whether any of these figures entered a state of ecstatic trance. The means of achieving such a state varies greatly from culture to culture. For example, the fly agaric, a hallucinogenic mushroom, which grows in the territory of the Eastern Slavs, was known to and used by the Samoyeds, the Ostyaks, and many other Siberian tribes. The Sami, like some Native American tribes, use drumming and chanting.<sup>64</sup> In the following taken from his book, *Russian Folklore*, Sokolov cites 17th century Patriarch Nikon’s (1652-1658) prohibition of “whirling dances” and comments on the similarity of their magical use with other shamanic techniques of ecstasy.

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<sup>63</sup> Eliade, *Shamanism* 13

<sup>64</sup> Karsten 59-60

The mention in ancient precepts of “whirling dances,” that is, apparently a type of shaman’s sorcery, and the account given in a chronicle of how “the wonder worker lay and grew numb,” that is, brought himself to a fainting condition, is exceedingly interesting. The resemblance of our ancient magicians to the shamans is to be found in the actual process of their sorcery. As the shamans alluded to the spirits, so the magicians begin their predictions: “The gods have revealed to us,” or “Five gods have revealed to me.” As the shaman falls into a stupor after his dance, so the magician, of who [the Patriarch] Nikon tells, lies “benumbed.” The strict prohibition of the “whirling dance” leaves no doubt as to the fact that the magicians are like shamans also in that method by which they brought themselves to the ecstatic condition.<sup>65</sup>

In this brief description Sokolov not only addresses Eliade’s criterion of a “technique of ecstasy,” but also contextualizes the practice within society by indicating that such events were public, i.e. the dances were forbidden (in public) and the fact that predictions were made for public benefit. Unfortunately, Sokolov’s observations in his 1938 book, *Russian Folklore*, came at a time when the prevalent opinion in Russian scholarship was that shamans were, “...persons with a deranged mind. And the hypothesis, never verified, triumphantly proceeded from one work to another.”<sup>66</sup> This hostile climate prevented any serious examination of shamanic elements in Russian folklore.

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<sup>65</sup> Yury Sokolov, *Russian Folklore* (Omnigraphics, 1971) 170-71. See also Anchikov, *Yazichestvo I drevnyaya Rus’*, 236, for the relevant passages from the Patriarch Nikon (1605-81)

<sup>66</sup> Balzer 5

## Shamanic imagery

Dianne Farrell has identified shamanic symbolism in depictions of Baba Iaga in late 17th and early 18th century *lubki*, or woodcuts. In “Baba Iaga Rides forth to Fight the Crocodile” (*fig. 1*) an image which she states researchers have repeatedly identified as a satire produced by the Old Believers, which mocks the domestic relations of Peter I and his wife. This interpretation is based on a rumor, current in Peter’s time, that Catherine had bewitched him and the fact that the Old Believers referred to Peter as “crocodile” because of his persecution of them.<sup>67</sup> Her objections to this interpretation are logical. She states that there is no written or pictorial evidence of political satire produced by the Old Believers at that time, nor any reason to suggest that they had the means to produce woodcuts or engravings. In addition she argues that, though Peter I was never portrayed with a beard, the “crocodile” is depicted with a very long beard. Furthermore, she argues that internal reasons including costume and details in the image link it to Finno-Ugric shamanism.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Dianne Farrell, "Shamanic Elements in Some Early Eighteenth Century Russian Woodcuts." *Slavic Review* 4. (1993): 727. JSTOR. Web. 14 Nov 2011

<sup>68</sup> Farrell 731



Figure 1.

Farrell puzzles however, over who the “crocodile” is meant to represent because she identifies him as a *volkhv* and Baba Iaga as “a famed witch of Slavic folktales, a chthonic goddess whose meaning and functions as such may be only dimly sensed or entirely lost.”<sup>69</sup> Her difficulty lies in the fact that many if not most of the *volkhvy* were women, (*baby bogomerzkiye*) “crones reviled of God.”<sup>70</sup> Here Baba Iaga is the *volkhv*, or rather the *volkhva*. The “crocodile,” *korkodil*, or *karkarladil* as it is variously misspelled in

<sup>69</sup> Farrell 728

<sup>70</sup> Smirnov, “Baby bogomerzkiye,” in *Sbornik statey posvyashchoniikh V. O. Klyuchevskomu* (Moscow: S. I. Yakovlev, 1909) 223, 227, 229.

captions of other woodcuts of the same scene, is not intended to represent an actual crocodile but clearly the sorcerer-werewolf of Russian folklore. At the time of the production of the image, the Russian understanding of the word was as part of a literary convention describing speed, cunning and ferocity.”<sup>71</sup>

Farrell notes the comic quality of Baba Iaga’s ferocious attack and the defensive posture of the “crocodile” but because of this interpretive dead end concludes, “...to look for a favored protagonist is probably pointless.”<sup>72</sup> Her assumption that the term, *volkhvy*, refers to male sorcerers is a typical one. However, with the image as With Baba Iaga identified as the *volkhv*, it is possible to interpret her opponent, with all its distinctly lupine features, as a *volkolak* or werewolf, a feared and unwelcome beast. The image in the lower left of the *lubok* under the “crocodile,” which some researchers claim is a ship, has served as the main argument for its identification with Peter I.<sup>73</sup> Shown beneath him in *fig. 1* (above) but absent contemporaneous *lubki* depicting the same scene, it is far from clear if it is really a ship. If one interprets the small figure as a monastery, (my first impression upon seeing the image) it is possible to interpret the scene depicted in the *lubok* as pagan backlash against the Church. This may or may not be the case, but clearly we are meant to side with Baba Iaga and the key to interpreting the meaning on the scene lies with the small image beneath the haunches of the *volkolak*, and the significance of

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<sup>71</sup> Farrell 734

<sup>72</sup> Farrell, 735

<sup>73</sup> Farrell, 726, 732

the bottle of wine present in both depictions, which clearly belongs to the “crocodile.” An important consideration in interpreting this clearly comical image is that it was funny because witches and sorcerers presumably didn’t get along. Maybe we are meant to understand the were-wolf sorcerer as a representation of someone else, but clearly in the context of an existing rivalry.

Farrell carefully identifies Baba Iaga’s clothing in the *lubki* as typical of Finno-Ugric cultures which practiced shamanism, as does she connect the wolf-man with the sorcerers of Russian folklore who turn themselves and others into wolves. Unfortunately, because of her desire to view Baba Iaga as a dimly recalled goddess and because she considers the “crocodile” a *volkhv*, she is unable to recognize the possibility of two competing shamanic cults.

The hypothesis is not only plausible but likely as most religions even today maintain different roles for men and women. This both simplifies and complicates the study of indigenous Slavic religion. On the one hand we are freed from the sort of problem Farrell encountered in trying to interpret the image of Baba Iaga fighting the were-wolf, on the other, we are now less sure than even of our terminology.

## The Völva and a Hut on Chicken's Legs

The Old Icelandic sagas tell of a sibyl or seeress called a *völva*. The name is presumed to be derived from *völr*, meaning “stick” and sometimes interpreted as a “wand.”<sup>74</sup> In chapter four of Erik's Saga, a 13th century telling of events from the late 10th century, we find a detailed account of a *völva* named Thorbjorg. Of particular interest is this section concerning what is translated here as “high-seat:”

Thorkel invited the prophetess to his house and prepared a good reception for her, as was the custom when such women were being received. A high-seat was made for her with a cushion on it, which had to be stuffed with hens' feathers.<sup>75</sup>

The word used in the sagas is *hjallr*, which means raised platform or framework of timbers. It was on such a structure, described in one saga as being supported on four poles that the first century seeress Veleda, of the Germanic tribe of Bructeri, was reported to have resided.<sup>76</sup>

Stick (or wand) in hand, perched on a cushion of hen feathers atop her *hjallr* supported by four poles, it is easier to imagine the *völva* rather than some dimly remembered goddess, as the model for Baba Iaga with her ubiquitous pestle in her hut on

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<sup>74</sup> Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, *Sanctity And Motherhood, Essays On Holy Mothers In The Middle Ages* (Routledge, 1995) 82

<sup>75</sup> Mulder-Bakker 73

<sup>76</sup> Mulder-Bakker 80

chicken's legs. What is the relationship of the Norse *völva* to the Slavic *volkhva*?<sup>77</sup> Whether the similarity of Baba Iaga to descriptions of the *völur* (plural of *völva*) should be attributed to Norse colonization, some earlier contact, a common source, or coincidence is unclear. It is clear however, that there existed in Russia a tradition of shamanic magic at least into the 17th century.

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<sup>77</sup> Ryan, 86

## Werewolf-Sorcerer

If we do accept some relationship between the Norse *völva* and the Slavic *volkhva*, we are left with questions as to the function of the sorcerer most commonly called *volkhv*. The whirling dance seems to only be associated with women and in Viking society; men who engaged in women's magic were ridiculed or punished.<sup>78</sup> Distinct male and female cults of magic may have been present among the East Slavs as well. In Ukraine and Belorussian *ved'mak* is used to refer to both magicians and were-animals.<sup>79</sup> This magical lycanthropy does not seem to have been practiced among the women in East Slavic society. Perhaps this distinction is part of the key to understanding the meaning of the Baba Iaga *lubok*. Where the *völva* seems to have been accorded a great deal of respect, their male counterparts were associated with black magic.<sup>80</sup>

Russian folklore abounds with stories of sorcerers who turn themselves and others into wolves. Possibly the most notable of these sorcerer-werewolves is Volkh Vseslavevich, the hero of one of the oldest *byliny* (epic poems), who according to Jakobson and Szeftel is a part of the Vseslav Epos which includes the historical figures the Bulgarian Prince Baianus and Prince Vseslav of Polotsk, both of whom were also believed to be sorcerer-werewolves.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Mulder-Bakker 76

<sup>79</sup> Ryan 86

<sup>80</sup> Mulder-Bakker 72-73

<sup>81</sup> Farrell 741

Most scholars point to the probable existence of a wolf cult among the pre-Christian Slavs and to Herodotus' report about the Neuroi, whose religious ceremonies comprised the donning of wolf-skins and entering into ecstatic trance wherein they were thought to become wolves. (See Herodotus, IV, 105)<sup>82</sup> The word for were-wolf in Russian is *volkodlak* but some form of it exists throughout the Slavic world and is formed out of words meaning "wolf" and "fur" or "pelt."<sup>83</sup> Could these be like the Neuroi Herodotus describes? Given the evidence, there seems to be a case for not one shamanic cult among the ancient Slavs, but two.

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<sup>82</sup> Maria Kravchenko, *The World of the Russian Fairy Tale* (Berne: P. Lang, 1987) 49

<sup>83</sup> Vasmer, 339

## The Bathhouse, Dismemberment, and Saint Nicholas

The *bania* or bathhouse was and in some places still is central to the life of the Russian peasant. It was a small structure with a primitive stove, built away from the house, used for taking steam baths and is not unlike the Finish sauna. Surrounded by numerous traditions and taboos, it was a favored place for divination and is generally regarded as a place frequented by spirits, particularly the *bannik* who takes his name from the bathhouse. Unlike the *domovoi* who is thought of as a capricious ancestor spirit (thus the euphemistic epithet “grandfather”) but who ultimately has a peaceable or even helpful relationship with the members of the household,<sup>84</sup> the *bannik* can be malicious. In the bathing ritual the final steaming was reserved for the *bannik* and his occasional guests of other spirits. Gifts of soap, fir branches, and water were left for his enjoyment and an obligatory “thank you” was offered upon leaving the bathhouse.<sup>85</sup>

No doubt thanks to its necessary function of hygiene it has managed to preserve much of the ritual concerning its use. No loud or unnecessary talking or singing was permitted in the bathhouse. What is more, no icons were hung in the bathhouse and before even entering the *bania* one removed one’s cross and belt.

There is an important association of the bathhouse with mother (or “Mother”) and birth as part of its tradition and symbolism. Indeed it is sometimes said that “the

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<sup>84</sup> Ryan 37

<sup>85</sup> Ivanits 59-60

bathhouse is your second mother.”<sup>86</sup> This may in part explain the curious fact that although the *bannik* and therefore also bathhouse were regarded as dangerous, it was customary for women to give birth in the bathhouse. Though he was normally feared, the *bannik* was believed to welcome the newborn and in fact, in the Novgorod Province one finds the belief that the *bannik* only takes up residence in the bathhouse after a child has been born there.<sup>87</sup>

In its association with birth the bathhouse and its rituals belong to a larger phenomenon of birth and rebirth beliefs:

The idea of gestation and childbirth is expressed by a series of homologizable images – entrance into the womb of the Great Mother (Mother Earth), or into the body of a sea monster, or of a wild beast, or even of a domestic animal. Obviously, the initiatory hut belongs to the same series of images; [...]<sup>88</sup>

Eliade reduces this category of myth into two types: those in which the return to the womb is mysterious but without much danger, and those in which “the return implies the risk of being torn to pieces in the monster’s jaws or in the *vagina dentata* of Mother Earth and of being digested in its belly.”<sup>89</sup>

It is not the nature of the bathhouse itself that qualifies it as an “initiatory hut” but rather the beliefs and practices associated with it. Certainly in the beliefs in the curative

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<sup>86</sup> Ryan 52

<sup>87</sup> Ivanits 59-60

<sup>88</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: the Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth* (Putnam, CT: Spring Publications, 2009) 93

<sup>89</sup> Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation* 93

powers of the *bania* and the rituals surrounding bathing it meets the criteria for the first of Eliade's two categories, however there are numerous stories about the *bannik* peeling away people's skin in the bathhouse.<sup>90</sup> In another legend we find Saint Nicholas traveling with a priest through the countryside under the guise of *znakhary* (folk healers). Interestingly, in this legend the two perform these healings in bathhouses by cutting people apart, washing the pieces and then reassembling them.<sup>91</sup> Both of these examples clearly represent the phenomenon of initiatory dismemberment. Another story about St. *Paraskeva-Friday* seems to indicate the cultural memory of ritual dismemberment without the initiatory context. In the legend, the saint was summoned by an unfamiliar youth to serve as a midwife for a bathhouse birth. When she arrived, she saw devils sitting on the shelves and the mother already in labor. The legend tells us that she was afraid that the devils would eat her but believed that this would only happen to her if it was God's will. Breaking taboo, she prayed over the newborn when she submerged him in water and placed a cross on him. In a great whirlwind, which suddenly arose inside the bathhouse, the mother and the devils all disappeared but the child remained unharmed.<sup>92</sup>

These examples along with surviving traditions surrounding the *bania* suggest that it once shared functions with other "initiatory huts." A careful examination of the

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<sup>90</sup> Ivanits 60

<sup>91</sup> Ryan 51

<sup>92</sup> Ivanits 46

bathhouse, its magic and its magicians may well yield further information supporting interpretations of Russian folklore as belonging to a larger tradition of shamanism.

## Conclusion

As I stated in the introduction, I do not suggest that a complete reconstruction of the pre-Christian East Slavic system of religious belief is possible. With the loss of the pagan religious leaders any sophisticated understating of the indigenous Slavic cosmology faded. However, it is clear from the accounts of the “whirling dance,” that the practices of the *volkhva* were shamanic. Furthermore, it would seem likely that there was an additional, distinct shamanic cult in place, that of the sorcerer-werewolf which has been historically conflated with that of the *volkhvy*. In addition, there is at least some evidence to suggest that separate male and female traditions were not part of a harmonious unified cosmology.

Perhaps like the shamanic cults of Siberia, the Arctic and Central Asia, the indigenous East Slavs scarcely felt the presence of a Celestial God and instead placed much more importance on ancestor and hunting cults. This would certainly go a long way toward explaining the lack of such Celestial Gods in the Slavic mythology and the relative importance of elemental gods such as the *leshii* and those individuals whose job it was to interact with them. Whether by the name Perun or some other name a creator was known to them, it may be that his role was not of particular importance to the life of the ancient East Slavs. Perhaps they were like the Sami, adopting and adapting the gods and practices of neighboring societies as they found use for them and abandoning them as they ceased to be useful or as better gods were found. In any event, with the dismissal of

the Kievan pantheon, what remains is a fairly complete picture of shamanism rather than a terrifically fragmented picture of classical paganism.

That Patriarch Nikon, found it necessary in the mid 17th century to forbid the whirling dance and that *lubki* from decades later depict Baba Iaga riding into battle against a werewolf-sorcerer suggests that these traditions were not only still practiced, but wide-spread enough to be referenced in popular culture. One hundred years later in 1754 Porfirii, bishop of Suzdal' wished to be relieved of his duties because he found magic and witchcraft being practiced in nearly every home, especially at the times of weddings and childbirth.<sup>93</sup> Already in the first part of the twentieth century, Sokolov suspected that indigenous Russian religion was shamanic but because of the political and intellectual climate, his theory did not get a fair hearing. Eighty years of intervening scholarship have since proven what he suspected. It is time for that hearing.

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<sup>93</sup> Ryan 422

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