

# The Destiny of Traditional Demonological Beliefs in Contemporary Ukrainian Society

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*Researched are the survivals of traditional pagan beliefs in contemporary society. It is considered that these elements of traditional culture are among crucial moments for an understanding of modern performers and their texts in contemporary agricultural and urban Ukrainian communities.*

The study of survivals of traditional pagan beliefs in contemporary society is one of the most crucial moments for an understanding of modern performers and their texts in contemporary agricultural and urban Ukrainian communities. While declaring that the general system of traditional mythology has been destroyed a long time ago (in industrial or in the so called “non-traditional” society), we have to keep in mind that traditional beliefs of our contemporaries contain a great amount of mythological survivals. Contemporary bearers of traditional knowledge often combine mythological notions with a set of modern superstitions, which are often supported by mass media sources and are very different from the original traditional forms, nevertheless they have a lot of common features with mythology. As a result superstitions and mythological beliefs are frequently used as criteria for further modes of behavior in everyday life.

Fieldwork provided by folklorists in the recent decades in the different regions of Ukraine and the observations in urban communities have provided important evidence of the wide spread extent of traditional mythological beliefs. Demonological legends always were extremely popular in Ukrainian agricultural communities, and they still play an important role in spiritual life of people today.

It is worth stressing that traditional methods of collecting folklore in modern society often fail to show an accurate picture of the spread of demonological beliefs in a certain community. If one expects a great amount of stories and does not receive them from tellers at once, this does not prove the absence of traditional mythological knowledge in the community. Often people give negative answers to direct questions about witches, dragons, house demons, mythological notions about the crossroads, etc. This is a paradox, that splendid information is usually hidden, so one has to be extremely careful to notice everything concerned with the traditional mythological notions. Nevertheless they usually can be traced even in the everyday communication and behavior. Even mere conversation among neighbors often contains a lot of superstitions. For instance, we witnessed situations when conversation between a few women on the street would concentrate around a neighbor whom they suspect of doing a witchcraft, or a simple question of being lost in the forest would discover the complex of ancient beliefs on the topic of wrong behavior, which caused the situation of “being lost in the forest”. A sim-

ple mention of the crossroads often results in discussions about demonic forces acting there.

Oral transmission can't be considered as the unique source of mythological notions in contemporary life, since other sources, including official, also have to be investigated. We can't ignore, for instance, the fact that some holidays have become popular in Ukraine due to mass media sources (Halloween, St.-Valentine Day) and organically feted into ordinary's people life. Such new adopted traditions often are unified and do not possess any regional particularities and variations, which differs them from authentic folk traditions of certain regions.

Mythological plots in contemporary Ukraine have a tendency to occupy a specific region, while being absent in others. For instance, in some villages in Černihiv Poliss'ja we can notice an alive and actively functioning beliefs about the ability of a witch to turn into a wheel or into various animals, at the same time in Kyïv and Žytomyr regions this motif belongs to the passive repertoire, but at the same time in the repertoire of local performers there dominate some other traditional plots, for instance, the strong belief that a witch can harm you by giving you something [*dann'ja*]. Someone who touched the *dann'ja* (it can be a cup or a glass, which breaks in your hand) will be under the influence of witchcraft. The prohibition to borrow some thing or to give anything to others results from this belief. The strong regional dependency of various mythological texts can confuse the collectors and make them think that certain plots or motives died out in contemporary times, when in reality they are not functioning in particular villages but are widely spread in others. These regional preferences reflect the peculiarities of traditional culture of the different regions of Ukraine, which are often deeply rooted – so far as concerns the peculiarities of the ethnic traditions of the different tribes, which inhabited these territories in the ancient times. Such differences are so strong that even a long time can't unify them.

The limited interest in demonology (or so called “lower” mythology) during the romantic period can be easily explained by the fact that scholars were primarily interested in the atavistic rudiments of the “higher” mythology. At this time alive and actively functioning demonological plots did not attract collectors' and scholars' scientific curiosity. Demonological legends were actively collected by Ukrainian folklorists only at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> – beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I. Nechyj-Levitsky, V. Hnatjuk, B. Hrynčenko, O. Malynka, V. Lesevyč, V. Myloradovyč and others collected a lot of demonological folk legends, often they did not pay as much attention to their study, as to the investigation of the other folk genres. Demonology has often been analyzed only in the context of folk pagan beliefs of the old Slavs. Neither performers of demonological prose nor texts themselves attracted any special attention. The Ukrainian writer, and folklorist I. Franko in his article “Bel parlar gentile” (1909) pointed out that folklorists should study folklore more widely, pay more attention to non-popular prosaic genres and create new approaches for the study of folk tradition and folk communication [Franko, 1986: 9]. Unfortunately, his ideas did not receive strong support at that time and folklorists concentrate all their attempts on the study of epic singers and later on the tale's recordings and performing, completely ignoring demonological prose. From today's point of view we can see that the very nature of demonological legends as genre is a base for its popularity among bearers.

If we turn our attention from the researches to the actual life of the folk demonological prose in the last 100 years in Ukrainian communities, we'll see a very interesting picture, and within the frames of this picture we'll see that folk demonology is one of the

most favorite genres of the Ukrainian folk performers and their listeners today. Active bearers of this tradition are present in both traditional agricultural and contemporary urban communities. Independently from politics and researcher's interests, demonological legends survived the time and historical changes and were passed on to the new generations. But the survival of the folk demonology and its popularity among members of the traditional agricultural communities is not as amazing as the influence it made on the world view and even on the mode of behavior of the contemporary urbanites. Collecting contemporary demonological legends in a traditional community we gained a chance to see clearly the origins of the superstitions and beliefs of our contemporaries which otherwise would look unexplainable, for instance, belief in supernatural forces among even most educated part of the population (cultural and political elite). Even among the most educated and technically minded persons in contemporary Ukraine there are extremely strong beliefs in witches, witchcraft, house demons, dead souls, sorceresses, and their influence on human life. Anthropologists who studied primitive cultures (C. Lévi - Strauss, A. Tylor, M. Morgan) all mentioned that for primitive tribes the reality itself is mythical. This would be a more or less accurate parallel to the contemporary spiritual life of Ukrainians. They are even building up the mythical reality using TV, newspapers, Internet. Let us prove it on various examples. The plot of the "dead returning" is very popular in today's Ukrainian agricultural and urban communities of different regions. Superstitions, beliefs, dreams' interpretation, rituals surrounding death itself, funeral and post-funeral period helping people to deal with death in a sort of pagan, primitive way. Traditional knowledge of any community has saved in a collective memory of the performers numerous texts of different genres and plots regarding the topic of the dead returning. For instance, the "dead fiancé's" motif is popular among bearers as a part of the folk narrative tradition (balladic and prosaic) and at the same time it was a constituent part of a set of superstitions and beliefs not only in traditional communities, but also in the urban culture. This motif gave important evidence of the traditional, most archaic understanding of the pass way between the worlds of the dead and alive, it equalizes wedding and death, giving us a picture of the world created by our ancestors and surviving in atavistic forms until most recent times. In urban communities we collected some clear examples of the fact that the traditional "dead fiancé" plot mirrored an influential, living belief widely spread among contemporary Ukrainians. For instance, in the Ukrainian newspaper *Факти* ("Fakty" – facts) in May 2005 was published an article about a tragic story, which had happened to a 14-year-old girl drowned in the river. Her grandma said in the interview that she heard the voice, which told her right after the death of the girl: "Your granddaughter got married. Fiancé from the grave came and took her." Thus, we are dealing here not just with a poetic symbolic language or simply a literary or folk plot, but with the actual alive belief of our contemporaries (let's point here also to an ancient, and at the same time alive today ritual of burying an unmarried girl in a wedding dress). Here is another clear example that, in contemporary Ukraine, the mass media are one of the most influential sources of transmission of traditional knowledge. In all the articles on catastrophes – personal, natural or social (people being killed, car accidents, murder, disappearance of the people) the first question an Ukrainian journalist would ask the victim would be: "Could you feel its coming, were you experiencing any signs from above?" The responses of the people can vary, but most commonly it would be such: "I saw a prediction in a dream, but did not interpret it correctly"; "The bird was beating into my window predicting the death";

“My dead ancestors came to warn me about the coming tragedy”; “The dog was barking all night”. We have to remember that such answers require the knowledge of traditional context at the very deep level (from both sides, because there are no explanations needed, neither for the person asking nor for the respondent): both sides have to know that according to traditional beliefs: dog barks when death is about to occur, cats and dogs feel when their owner will die and show it in various ways, birds can predict the death by flying into the house and pecking against the windows. This is going back to pagan beliefs that demons and the dead can turn into animals, birds can represent a dead soul, etc. Thus, we see that people found such questions to be not only normal, but even natural in the general conversation. A communicative artistic event arises in the conversation between the journalist and the witness of the event, and as a result the entire article looks like a folk narrative and all the readers become its audience. Let’s analyze more samples when mass media sources become a chain ring in the life of traditional demonological beliefs. Stuttering, epilepsy, fears of various kinds which people prefer to treat with the help of the sorceress, white witchcraft of folk healers which includes the use of the black cloth and egg rubbing as the main treating equipment. How do people find out about such healers? – Oral recommendation plays a big but not the main role. Much more influential are articles published in respected newspapers and magazines advertising the services of white witches (called *vorožky* and *znacharky* in Ukraine). The mentality of people is such that they often trust *vorožka* much more than hospitals and doctors (especially in cases when medicine is powerless). The same kind of behavior was very typical for Ukrainians at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. People in the village would ignore doctors and go to the healers for treatment; if death was the result of the treatment, others would say that this was the destiny of the individual. The same concerns fortunetellers. At least four out of 17 TV channels permanently advertise the services of the future tellers, dream interpreters, white witches. Naïve hope was expressed by the priests of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that superstitions and belief in witchcraft, dead souls returning, and folk healers would disappear with the growth of literacy, but now we can say, that the spread of literacy fortunately did not influence the folk narrative tradition to a great deal. Today’s situation in terms of witchcraft, superstitious beliefs and traditional worldview is about the same as it was a hundred years ago, with the exception that all the literary sources were adapted by villagers as a part of the oral tradition (bible legends, magazine or newspaper articles are functioning inside the community as a natural, organic component of the oral tradition). Despite complete literacy of the population we can still trace living demonological beliefs. So far literacy has not dramatically influenced either the functioning of certain genders or the mentality of its bearers over the last century.

Today folklorists are confronted with the question: does traditional knowledge influence mass media sources, or are they becoming one of the most influential channels for the transmission of the oral tradition in modern times? The only thing we can say with certainty is that both the oral transmission and written sources are often serving the same purpose: to prolong and intensify the life of traditional knowledge. As a result, mythological elements become a part of the spiritual and everyday life of our contemporaries. Let’s take a closer look at some other aspects concerning the functioning of demonological motifs in agricultural and urban communities.

The narratives about the crossroads, and the set of superstitions, rites and rituals surrounding them can be an obvious evidence of widespread traditional beliefs and the

destiny of traditional mythological notions in contemporary oral culture. This is quite clearly presented in the texts, which reflect an attitude of contemporary villagers toward the crossroads. The traditional attitudes to the crossroads as to dangerous places inhabited by supernatural forces and creatures are extremely stable and steadily reproduced in Slavic oral culture. They are also well known in other ethnic cultures.

The research conducted in the different Ukrainian regions provides a source for investigation of traditional mythological notions, reflected in the everyday behavior and in the traditional narratives, its functioning and performance peculiarities during the 20<sup>th</sup> and at the very beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Contemporary bearers often give a pragmatic explanation of the evident fact, that in Ukrainian villages the buildings as a rule are built far from the crossroads. This is quite opposite to the mode of the contemporary urban space organization. Mythological explanations are extremely rare now. But the evidence of survival of mythological notions is quite clear too. They are actualized in the stereotypes of the everyday behavior, often based on the traditional prohibitions and limitations. This provides a good example of the mode of the contemporary functioning of mythological notions.

Since traditional notions concerning crossroads are stable and reproduced in different cultures, scholars paid close attention to this topic, which helps to investigate important features of the mythological semantics of this locus, its ritual and sacred meaning in traditional occupations. On the basis of studies by our predecessors, we are going to make an attempt to look over the circle of motifs linked with the crossroads and reproduced by contemporary performers. These traditional notions constitute part of the much wider area of traditional mythological images. Russian folklorist E. Levkievskaja stressed that mythological semantic and ritual functions of the road appear to be the most noticeable in the places where two roads meet (crossroads) [Levkievskaja: 1999]. This why in folk tradition notions about the crossroads obtain semantic and poetic features of the road, the way of life, life's destiny. In folk imagination, the road at the crossing is interpreted as a border between two worlds: the world of the dead and the world of the living. It is the dangerous place where demonic forces are gathered. The texts, which reflect traditional notions about crossroads, vary not only verbally, but also in the plot details. The most commonly functioning motifs and plots among contemporary performers would be following:

- meeting with the mythological creature on the crossroads (demons, tornado, witch turned into a dog, etc.);
- house, which was built on the crossroads is uninhabitable. Only demonic creatures live there, those who ignore this fact become sick, die, or are disturbed by demonic forces and leave this house;

The mode of traditional behavior – some typical rituals and rites linked with the crossroads, which can be accompanied by the verbal component – also reflects the mythological semantic of this place. The most popular and actual among them today are:

- the removing, banishment, burying or demolishing of certain objects with sacral purpose (to protect or harm someone, to make a sacrifice, etc.);
- the sacral signs on the crossroads (for the needs of protection);
- the crossroads as a place for fortune telling, place for graves of those who died unnaturally, place for punishment, execution, etc.;
- the place, where people recollect dead ancestors.

Such beliefs are closely linked with traditional prohibitions, which limits the mode of behavior at the crossroads (for instance, prohibitions to stay there overnight, to pick up things which were dropped there, to sing or scream, and to leave litter on the crossroads.

All these prohibitions are based on the archaic notions which have been preserved in the memory of the folk bearers. There are many facts confirming the stability of traditional knowledge among contemporary bearers of tradition. Our fieldwork shows how alive those notions are in agricultural communities. We collected various texts which reflect a prohibition to build houses on crossroads. These are the stories about demons scaring the occupant of the house at night, and about a tornado chasing women on the crossroads. All of them come up in the conversations quite naturally and villagers (who tell the story) have no doubts that crossroads are sacred, demonic places. Older performers told us on numerous occasions that the new generation does not believe in the dangers of the crossroads, yet right after these remarks we would hear a story proving non-believers to be wrong. All these stories prove the stability of mythological images, their popularity.

It's the case that today's audience in Ukrainian folk communities' demands demonological legends and listens to them with greater interest than other folklore plots. This is why demonological legends give us not only a chance to analyze the life of certain narratives, but also an opportunity to understand the traditional worldview of its bearers. Texts themselves become a bridge to the traditionally oriented minds of the people who live in contemporary folk communities. If among urban bearers of tradition demonological knowledge exists as a set of superstitions, mythical beliefs and analogies, in the traditional agriculture communities they are functioning as fully organized texts some of which completely correspond to the recordings of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. If you go to an Ukrainian village today, you will receive the full flavor of various demonological plots. Today's agricultural folk community gives the researcher a chance not only to hear the story, but to experience the presence of the house demons (*they have hairy hands, heavy, whispering voice*), to talk to dead souls, to see dragon flying through the chimney, to touch a witch's tail. All your senses are included in the transmission of the demonological legend. Whenever you are in the village, talking to the bearers of the tradition you can't logically deny the existence of the demonic forces and underestimate their influence on human life because the entire atmosphere of any communicative event is influenced by the traditional worldview of our ancestors. On the sample of the particular village we would like to prove that demonological legends are spontaneously transmitted in the natural context in today's Ukrainian agricultural community and even more widely spread than a hundred years ago in the same community.

During the last 12 years we thoroughly studied the folklore prosaic repertoire of the Ukrainian village Ploske. We consider Ploske to be a typical and quite representative contemporary Ukrainian folk community. Demonological prose narratives collected during these field trips include legends about house demons, male and female witches, white and black witchcraft, stories about returning of the dead, legends about mermaids, devils, sorceresses, texts built on the dream's interpretation. Some of these texts gave interesting and unexpected materials, which are very important for the study of the life of the contemporary prosaic tradition. Considering the fact that we had materials for comparative analysis of the contemporary texts, and those which were collected over a hundred years ago in Ploske by Ukrainian folklorist O. Malynka [Malynka, 1902], we could study the life of folk prose in this community in its historical dynamics and can compare its statuses

among active and passive bearers at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. During our fieldwork we used various techniques for collecting narratives as well as their context. Prosaic texts collected from contemporary narrators with video and audio equipment testify very clearly that at least in this community folklore is as alive as ever and its performers and audience are very enthusiastic about and active during the artistic communication. Even with repeated recordings of the same story from the same performer in different communicative situations, each had its own character and charm. During our research in Ploske we tried to follow the ‘vacuum-cleaner’ method (complete survey, when all the texts independently of their aesthetical value are recorded by the field worker). Incidentally, this was the method O. Malynka used in his fieldwork, and for doing this he was actively criticized by two most prominent folklorists at the time B. Hrynčenko and V. Hnatjuk. They argued that his texts were far away from being perfect, some of them V. Hnatjuk described as being damaged, uninteresting and lifeless [Hnatjuk, 1902: 42]. Ironically enough, O. Malynka’s recordings are much more valuable for contemporary scientists since they give a clearer picture of the actual life of folk tradition in the community at the particular historical time and give us a chance to make objective comparative analyses with today’s situation. His anthology has 52 prosaic texts from Ploske. Our materials collected at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (we recorded over 300 prosaic texts; most of which are demonological legends and tales) testify that the folk prose tradition in Ploske did not decrease over the century despite the strong belief of most folklorists of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that traditional folklore genres are dying and the number of knowledgeable performers is continuously decreasing. During our fieldwork we communicated with more than fifty performers, twenty of whom can be characterized as active. Most of our volunteer-performers were elderly and not highly educated women. They were the easiest to involve into communication, they knew a lot about traditions and what’s crucial – they believed in what they said. Folklore is a natural part of their existence and they perform not so much for listeners as for themselves. Whenever we would ask about particular demonological legend or plot, recorded in this community a century ago we would receive not only this text but variations as well (witch turning into cat or a dog, witch turning into a wagon wheel, the hard death of the male witch, the appearance of the house demon and his prediction of the future). All of these texts were familiar in a “full” plot development to most of our respondents. They would address us to the newspapers and bible texts for the references (a common element of the contemporary performing act) or swear that they saw witch’s tail and even touched it, felt the breath or the touch of the hob, heard his voice, they would use their neighbors as the addressee of the demonic forces action (dead mother came to my neighbor, hurricane at the cross-walk blew the neighbor away or the neighbor was a witch) and with this many witnesses you would have to believe that this is the world where such things happen.

Thus, all the plots and motifs recorded by O. Malynka are actually functioning in the natural context in contemporary Ploske. We also found more plots of demonological legends than folklorists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century have collected there. The mythical beliefs and traditionally oriented mentality of the people are present as strongly as was described by our predecessors. The recordings of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and of the very beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century give us a possibility for comparative analysis of the life of the demonological prose over the century in certain communities [see: Britsyna O., Golovakha I., 2004].

Materials collected there prove that traditions in the agricultural community are preserved and passed down through generations. All the traditional demonological per-

sonages are well known to the contemporary villagers, the plots and motifs recorded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century are functioning in traditional agricultural communities as a part of an active repertoire, the main element of the oral communication during which an exchange of the traditional knowledge occurs. Demonological prose is still an important part of the spiritual life of the traditional agricultural community today.

In cities demonological prose is functioning as a set of beliefs and superstitions which correspond to the traditional plots and pagan beliefs of previous generations. The traditional plots do not function as a part of an artistic communicative event in urban communities as actively as in village communities due to the specific nature of the urban folk communities versus the agricultural community: in the village the territorial closeness, the similarity of the life style and spiritual interests make the community much stronger traditionally oriented, traditions preserving unity. In the city, members of a particular folk community are much more flexible and mobile and influenced by many different factors. This makes it especially amazing how widely spread and influential traditional demonological beliefs among contemporary Ukrainian urbanites. The political, social, cultural and every day life of an ordinary Ukrainian urbanite is explained by the members of the community not through natural causes but through traditional understandings of the way things happen: husband left you – look for the white witch who will help return him to you, you are sick a lot – look for a black witch who makes you sick; people sincerely believe in the human or above human (demonic) influence over their life and they try to protect themselves with the help of traditional knowledge.

We began our article with a newspaper example, in order to show how widely spread and popular traditional plots are, let us finish with a similar example, which proves one more time the traditionally oriented world view of the contemporary people, their mythical consciousness and wish to explain events through the action of the supernatural forces. There was an article published in a Kyiv newspaper in 2004 describing a case of unexplainable evil. When the doctor of the small village with a very good reputation suddenly went crazy and killed four people in the village. The case is strange. But the reaction of the villagers to our understanding is much more strange: they all decided that the doctor could not behave like that, that the village's evil witch had got into his body and done it. Thus, the doctor is innocent and they are looking for the witch in order to punish her. In our opinion this example shows very clearly that agricultural and urban demonological beliefs are alive, close bound together and actively functioning in contemporary Ukrainian society.

The wide spread of demonological beliefs among urbanized people shows us that in contemporary Ukraine the connections (spiritual, cultural and economical) between the city and village are very tight and that the traditional agricultural way of living influences people's life more fully than urbanization influences traditional communities. In order to understand properly and to describe correctly the place of mythological survivals in the consciousness of Ukrainian urbanites and the popularity of demonological beliefs among them, we have to take into account that they are closely linked and often deeply rooted in the traditional culture of agricultural folk communities. Due to the natural causes, Ukrainians living in big cities have very tight connections to the village life: most of them have first generation relatives living in a nearby village, they visit them, they eat out of the village gardens, they celebrate big events in the villages among their relatives. As a result the traditional agriculture mentality influences urbanites as strongly as contemporary urban mode of life influences new coming individuals.



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## **Razvoj tradicionalnih demonoloških verovanj v sodobni Ukrajini**

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Številni prežitki tradicionalnih poganskih verskih predstav v sodobni Ukrajini se pogosto pojavljajo v vsakdanjem družbenem življenju. Sodobni nosilci tradicionalnih veščin in znanja velikokrat združujejo stare verske sestavine z modernimi verovanji in ezoteriko. Ti moderni elementi prodirajo tudi prek množičnih občil in so drugačni od tradicionalnih verskih predstav, imajo pa mnogo skupnega z mitologijo. Avtorici sta kot primer predstavili verske predstave in prakse današnjega podeželskega prebivalstva, ki so povezane s križišči. Raziskovali sta v različnih ukrajinskih regijah, kot krajevni vzorec pa sta izbrali vas Ploske, kjer sta v zadnjih dvanajstih letih opravili temeljite terenske raziskave.

Študija je med drugim pokazala, da so verske predstave, mitološki vzorci in stare verske prakse močno prisotni tudi v mestih. Razširjeno verovanje v demone med ukrajinskimi meščani kaže na to, da so tudi v sodobni Ukrajini duhovne, kulturne in gospodarske vezi med mestom in vasjo še vedno zelo tesne in da ima tradicionalni poljedelski način življenja veliko večji vpliv na meščane, kot pa ga ima urbanizacija na tradicionalne skupnosti. Da bi resnično razumeli in pravilno ovrednotili mesto, ki ga imajo mitološki prežitki v zavesti ukrajinskih mestnih prebivalcev, in pa popularnost verovanja v demone med njimi, moramo upoštevati, da so meščani še vedno tesno povezani s tradicionalno ljudsko kulturo poljedelskih skupnosti in v njej pogosto tudi čvrsto zakoreninjeni.