



"It Takes All Kinds of Trees to Make a Forest:" Trees Associated with Feminine Folklore in the Eastern Slavic Folk Calendar

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Abstract

Eastern Slavic folklore, particularly mythology from Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine, is innately tied to the ecosystem in which it developed. Tales and perception of the natural world consequently elevated and designated specific flora as sacred, setting the way for these species to be recognized as central to national folklore or symbolism. In myth and folklore, trees were bestowed with masculine or feminine genders either due to their grammatical categorization or traditional physical characteristics associated with the sexes. Of relevance to this analysis, trees deemed feminine influenced mystical practices for women celebrants, especially in connection to the Eastern Slavic folk calendar. Theurgy and veneration of birch, rowan, and linden trees, including folk holidays Bereshchenye, Ryabinovka, Ryabinnik, and the Feast of the Nativity of the Mother of God will be examined.

Keywords: Eastern Slavic peoples, ethnodendrology, folk belief, folk calendar, trees



Résumé

Le folklore des peuples slaves orientaux, en particulier la mythologie de la Biélorussie, de la Russie, et de l'Ukraine, est intimement lié à l'éco-système des régions où il s'est développé. Les contes, joints à une perception particulière du monde naturel, menèrent à considérer certaines plantes comme faisant partie du sacré, pavant la voie vers la reconnaissance de la place privilégiée de ces plantes dans le folklore slave et les système symbolique nationaux. Dans les mythes and les traditions folkloriques, les arbres sont investis d'un genre masculin ou féminin, soit à cause de l'usage linguistique habituel, soit à cause des caractères physiques associé à un genre ou l'autre. Relation pertinente dans mon analyses, les arbres considérés comme féminins sont liés aux pratiques rituelles des femmes, en particulier en connection avec le calendrier populaire des Slaves orientaux. Nous examinons la theurgie et la vénération du bouleau, du sorbier et du tilleul, et les fêtes populaires Bereshchenye, Ryabinovka, et Ryabinnik, ainsi que la fête de la Nativité de la mère de Dieu.

Mots-clés: Peuples slaves orientaux, ethnodendrologie, croyances folkloriques ou populaire, calendrier populaire, arbres féminins

Introduction

The lands of the Eastern Slavic peoples - modern Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine - were untamed though plentiful, demanding yet lush. As bitterly cold winters transitioned to spring and summer, one could not know if the forthcoming growing season would result in bountiful harvests or lean times. In the pre-Christian era, adherents of ancient Slavic indigenous faiths believed that their surroundings were bound up with supernatural essences and this led to a mystical understanding of the world around them. Elements of these beliefs endured as myths that were passed down through generations by oral tradition and folk practices. Folk holidays that marked changing seasons and times where community members united in merriment are documented in folk calendars, particularly that belong to the Eastern Slavic community, one that is shared by the peoples at the centre of this analysis. As the cult of saints overtook the dominant reverence for nature, holidays formerly focused on natural processes gained Christian elements; previous beliefs remain evident, however, in folk practices.

Plants, particularly trees, were understood to act as portals that allowed spirits to enter into the living world and this principle compelled Eastern Slavs to revere certain genera. Trees became central figures in folk rituals where communities sought blessings like a

fruitful harvest, a productive marriage, or protection from natural forces. More often than not, the gender of the practitioner was central to the shape of the rite, as well as the season and timing of the ritual with respect to specific trees. Today, the birch, rowan, and linden are special in terms of folk calendar festivities: two have birthday celebrations and the other is associated with festivities celebrating the birth of the Mother of God.

This paper will examine the significance of birch, rowan, and linden trees in relation to folkloric beliefs and practices in the Eastern Slavic folk calendar. Much research has been completed in the fields of ethnohistory, ethnolinguistics, and ethnodendrology by Slavicists, but this investigation takes a narrower approach by using the folk calendar as its basis. This narrow focus is important because it centralizes the birch, rowan, and linden according to their respective holidays, known historically and remembered today. In order to explain this position, it is imperative to discern how Eastern Slavic peoples viewed tree symbolism and what these plants meant in their mythology and in their lives. The connection between tree symbolism and gender further explains which trees were revered and how. Finally, this enquiry will focus on the perceived gender of the selected trees and how this shaped legends about their origins and folk practices.

This analysis was crafted from the perspective of an author with maternal Ukrainian roots, a perpetual student of the Russian language, and a learner of forest stewardship. Additionally, this author has personally celebrated certain dates of the Eastern Slavic folk calendar, from the pancakes and Forgiveness Sunday of *Maslenitsa*, eating apples on Apple Spas, and visiting mountain ash trees on *Ryabinnik*. These factors stirred an intellectual aspiration to compile and nuance all these tidbits of knowledge.

Trees in Eastern Slavic Mythology and Notes on the Folk Calendar

Early Slavs were bound to the natural environment that surrounded their communities and this relationship shaped perceptions about how the world functioned. The addition of mysticism, demonstrated through reverence for deities and entities affiliated with specific flora, fauna, and forces of nature, acted as a means to explain and understand the seasonal progression of nature and related social development of its inhabitants. Many Slavic rites had ritual magical content associated with the vegetation cult - rites focused on the worship of trees, flowers, and grass.¹ Missionaries sent to study and convert local Prussian, Baltic and nearby Slavic populations in the years between 900 - 1000 CE observed such practices. For instance, the 999 CE biographical text *The Life of Saint Adalbert of Prague*, widely attributed to Benedictine monk John Canaparius, states "Most of the land is under the sway of the error of paganism, they worship the creature instead

¹ Vlasova, Galina, "Slavic and Kazakh Folklore Calendar: Typological and Ethno-Cultural Parallels", *Folklore* 63 (2016), p. 69.

of the Creator, the tree and the rock, instead of God.”² Whilst this investigation is not focused on paganism nor these early days, this example illustrates the Eastern Slavic peoples’ special relationship with trees.

Slavic tree worship was not unique though. Ethnolinguist Marina M. Valentsova argues that the Slavic cult of trees was not as developed as in neighbouring Germanic and Finnic lands, thus leading to the conclusion that mystical beliefs about trees originated in lands where Slavic peoples coexisted with the named groups.³ Indeed, scholars Marianna Dudareva and Nina Goeva state that linguists consider a tree to be a special concept embodied into the great context of national axiology, but the type of tree is of utmost importance to understanding its symbolism.⁴ Slavs subscribed to the concept of the World Tree along with cultures even further away from the heartlands of the Eastern Slavic peoples than those mentioned above; for instance, the World Tree is present, even central, in native faiths found in the Americas, Indo-European lands, and Siberia. Versions include mythical Greek olive trees known as Moriai associated with the goddess Athena, the giant ash called Yggdrasill whose leaves support the heavenly dwelling of gods in Norse mythology, and the Seneca world tree used in ceremonies of the Iroquois nation located in New York state.⁵ This religious motif is important as it represents an *axis mundi* or axis of the Earth that unites the celestial bodies of the heavens, the Earth or active human existence, and the underworld.

Trees were bestowed with parallel attributes expanding them beyond simple components of nature: mystical elements with connections to other realms and the cosmos. Scholars such as Della Hooke note that trees continuously attracted attention as iconic symbols, objects of worship, and were once viewed as the pivotal axis of the cosmos throughout history.⁶ Akin to the composition of the World Tree with its crown, woody trunk at the centre, and roots, Slavic folklore presents that unclean spirits live in the roots, living humans represent the trunk, and the top is associated with God.⁷

² "Life of Saint Adalbert of Prague", 2.6.1, in *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, ed. Juan Antonio Álvarez-Pedrosa (Leiden, Brill, 2021), p. 64.

³ Valentsova, Marina M., "K voprosu o personifikatsii dereva u slavyan" (On the question about the personification of trees among the Slavs), *Slavyanovedeniye* (Slavic Studies) Vol 6 (2017), p. 46.

⁴ Dudareva, Marianna A., and Nina P. Goeva., 'White Willow in Russian Literature: Folklore "Roots" of Image', *Journal of Social Studies Education Research* Vol 8:3 (2017), p. 291.

⁵ Parker, Arthur C., 'Certain Iroquois Tree Myths and Symbols', *American Anthropologist* Vol 14:4 (Oct.-Dec. 1912), p. 611.

⁶ Hooke, Della., "Tree Symbolism Throughout History," in *Trees Beyond the Wood: An Exploration of Concepts of Woods, Forests, and Trees*, eds. Ian D. Rotherham, Christine Handley, Mauro Agnoletti, and Tomasz Samojlik (Sheffield, UK: Wildtrack Publishing, 2012), p. 123.

⁷ Borisova, Lyudmila V., 'Kontsept «derevo» kak lingvokul'turnyy kod' (Concept of «tree» as linguacultural code), *Vestnik MGGU im. M.A. Sholokhova* (Bulletin of Sholokhov Moscow State University for the Humanities) Issue 1 (2014) p. 35.

Scholars speculate that it is the representation of the living world as the trunk of a tree or the tree's personification that may provide insight into how Eastern Slavic people viewed their interactions with trees and how this symbolism shaped their rituals. Lyudmila B. Borisova states the most important aspect of tree mythology is its correlation with humans.⁸ A similar view, expressed by ethnolinguist Tatyana A. Agapkina, shares that trees in mythology symbolize a person in terms of their body, some sort of vital activity, or their fate. They play the role as a universal mediator.⁹ Trees became models for describing the life of a person, their appearance and emotions insofar that trees were linked to humans according to external features.¹⁰ As an example, the Rusyns of Transcarpathia held a folk belief that the soul of a person transferred into trees and those trees became revered.¹¹ Further referencing broader tree mythologies, Hooke offers "the tree itself could have been regarded as an embodiment of a godlike or ancestral spirit but it seems more likely that the trees were representative of a hidden presence."¹² Still, this is not the end of deciphering tree symbolism in East Slavic myth. Symbolic complexity is further enriched when a particular *genus* represents or behaves like a person in ritual.¹³ These explanations of tree veneration consequently inform us that trees used in rituals were meant to stand on behalf of a deity, an ancestor, or simply an essence with whom people sought to create a supernatural connection. Additionally, the type of tree being honoured offers keys or clues about the intentions of invocations or simply celebratory folk practices.

Holidays related to specific trees have been remembered due to presence in the Eastern Slavic folk calendar - an almanac in folk practices related to Belarus, European Russia, and Ukraine. It should be noted that this calendar has its roots in the observations of natural cycles and agricultural phases observed by local peoples for generations. However, since the eighteenth century, numerous autonomous calendars, such as those for Christian holidays, lunar phases, and pastoral activities, have been combined in one document meant for dissemination among all sectors of society.¹⁴ These books are useful yet entertaining reading because they showcase a variety of folk activities and conventions stated to have roots from ancient times. Folk beliefs and celebrations may have kernels of

⁸ Borisova, p. 35.

⁹ Agapkina, Tatyana, 'Derevo' (Tree) in *Slavyanskiye drevnosti: Etnolingvisticheskiy slovar' v 5-ti tomakh - Tom 2. D-K* (Slavic Antiquities: Ethnolinguistic Dictionary in 5 Volumes - Volume 2. D-K) ed. N. Tolsoy (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyye otnosheniya, 1999), p. 60.

¹⁰ Puchkova, Yelena V., 'Simvolicheskiy kul'turnyy kod derevo v russkom yazyke' (Symbolical Cultural Code the Tree in Russian Language), *Epokha nauki* (Age of Science) Vol 14 (June 2018), p. 262-263.

¹¹ Usacheva, Valeria V., *Magiya slova i deystviya v narodnoy kul'ture slavyan* (The Magic of Words and Actions in the Folk Culture of the Slavs) (Moscow: Russian Academy of Science, 2008), p. 175.

¹² Hooke, p. 123.

¹³ Dudareva and Goeva, p. 290.

¹⁴ Tolstaya, Svetlana M., 'Kalendar' narodnyy" (Folk calendar), in *Slavyanskiye drevnosti: Etnolingvisticheskiy slovar' v 5-ti tomakh - Tom 3. K-P* (Slavic Antiquities: Ethnolinguistic Dictionary in 5 Volumes - Volume 3. K-P) ed. Nikita Tolstoy, (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyye otnosheniya, 2004), p. 442.

truth in relation to ancient activities, but these truths have been nuanced or changed over generations. Originally, beliefs were spread through storytelling and practice of local customs. As well, folk calendars change across regions to reflect the environment in which they were developed. It can be said that the Eastern Slavic folk calendar is an artificial construction that combines the Christian adoration of saints on their specific feast days with non-Christian revelries celebrating changes in seasons on standardized dates. On one hand, the cult of saints has become the heart of the Slavic folk calendar.¹⁵ On the other, the calendar follows the main stages of the annual vegetation cycle.¹⁶ It is for this reason one witnesses celebrations of honey, berries, or fruit associated loosely with religious figures in the pages of these books. Worthy of this investigation, there are activities associated with trees regarded as feminine featured in the folk calendar.

Tree Symbolism According to Gender

Following the line of argument that trees and related rituals were rooted in their connection to humans, it is then logical to explore the relation of particular species according to the categorization of gender: specifically, with women. One must probe how trees such as oak, maple, poplar and beech are classified as masculine whilst willow, pine and cherry (as well as the birch, rowan, and linden at the centre of this article) are deemed feminine. Cases made by scholars of linguistics and Slavic folklore observe that trees were classified not only by their grammatical gender, but by their physical appearances as well.

To commence, Agapkina shares that the personification of individual trees as female and male is often related to how their grammatical gender has been categorized.¹⁷ She notes that, for example, maple (клен) is grammatically masculine whilst willow (ива) is noted as feminine. This classification is then expanded to cover objects sourced from that tree and associated rituals.¹⁸ In a related hypothesis, ethnographer and folklorist Nikita I. Tolstoy states that language and its categories contribute to mythological thinking and mythological representation of objects such as trees.¹⁹ However, it would be far too simple to solely rest on the argument that the abundance of folklore and myth related to gendered trees simply came down to grammar, especially as dioecious and monoecious trees populate forests. Agapkina ultimately notes that the role of trees acting as stable

¹⁵ Vlasova, p. 71.

¹⁶ Agapkina, 'Derevo', in *Slavyanskiye drevnosti* p. 66.

¹⁷ Agapkina, Tatyana, 'Grammaticheskiy rod i kul'turnaya semantika: o «muzhskikh» i «zhenskikh» derev'yakh v slavyanskoy traditsii' (Grammatical Gender and Cultural Semantics: about "male" and "female" trees in Slavic tradition), *Slavyanovedeniye* (Slavic Studies) Vol 6 (2017), p. 37.

¹⁸ Agapkina, 'Grammaticheskiy rod', p. 37.

¹⁹ Tolstoy, Nikita I., *Yazyk i narodnaya kul'tura: Ocherki po slavyanskoy mifologii i etnolingvistike* (Moscow: Indrik, 1995), p. 337-338.

allegorical replacements is not all based on grammatical gender though it does indeed play a preliminary role.²⁰

Additionally, linguist Alexander V. Kravchenko argues that it is difficult to find any real semantic justifications in the classification of inanimate nouns; he even examined certain tree species as an example. He notes, "Why is дуб (dub) oak a he, and берёза (beryoza) birch tree - a she?"²¹ In answering this question in his article 'The Cognitive Roots of Gender in Russian,' Kravchenko provides an interesting and insightful hypothesis into how the early Slavs imagined the spirits inherent in their natural world, one that is central to this analysis. He posits that inanimate objects, such as trees, had their grammatical genders classified because their characteristics as well as functional uses could be aligned to those that differentiated the sexes in a human context.²² Therefore, a big, strong sturdy oak exhibited features that early Slavs deemed masculine whilst the slim, thin, yielding рябина (ryabina/mountain ash or rowan) represented those traits aligned with femininity.²³

It is of importance to note as well that within the same tree species, male and female specimens can exist. Slavs learned to differentiate them by their morphological and biological features, such as whether a tree bore fruit or simply pollen and if their branches grew upwards or downwards.²⁴ Therefore, from these observations, it is evident that physical characteristics of trees played a role in how Eastern Slavs identified trees as either masculine or feminine. Agapkina makes similar observations when noting the association of specific tree species with male and female features that are most representative of both sexes.²⁵ Therefore, trees linked to traditionally masculine characteristics, such as strength and power, became markers for male symbolism in folk culture and trees with seemingly female features, like bearing fruit, soft wood, and gentle beauty, betokened female representation.

These connotations around trees were subsequently applied to folkloric practices and the individuals meant to partake in specific rites. Tolstoy observes that the gender or genus of the tree in the ceremonial environment is related to the sex of person engaged in the ritual.²⁶ Mothers could only know to bring a sick daughter to a birch and a sick son to an oak because of a communal culture around nature and veneration of certain trees as

²⁰ Agapkina, 'Grammaticheskiy rod', p. 37.

²¹ Kravchenko, Alexander V., 'The Cognitive Roots of Gender in Russian', *The Slavic and East European Language Resource Center Issue 3* (Spring 2002), p. 4.

<http://cogprints.org/4007/1/RootsOfGender.pdf>

²² Kravchenko, p. 5.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Agapkina, 'Grammaticheskiy rod', p. 38.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Tolstoy, p. 338.

masculine or feminine.²⁷ Girls of marriageable age were instructed by their elders how to engage in rituals such as Rusal'naia Week, how to dress for rites like Ryabinovka, and why linden branches decorated homes in the springtime. Young women were prepared to enter the next stage of community membership through these communal interactions that were assisted by belief in rites and festivities. Tree symbolism and activities completed by women is evident in folk holidays mentioned in the Eastern Slavic folk calendar, particularly those related to birch, rowan, and linden.

Trees Prominent in the Folk Calendar and Related Symbolism

Trees were absolutely important to the early Slavs as they provided numerous necessities of life ranging from building materials to medicines and food sources. In addition to these essential elements for survival, both deciduous and coniferous sorts were bequeathed supernatural elements. The physical being and sometimes imposing presence of trees elicited an array of human emotions that seem to have stirred spiritual reflections.

These are especially important observations relevant to this analysis as it determines the definite linkage between trees and humans in traditional folklore. It is the addition of general experiences in the natural environment with views of gender in specific societies that consequently shape tree symbolism. Concepts of any hidden presences were linked to the given gender of trees; therefore, in the case of birch, rowan, and linden trees, days of veneration marked in folk calendars have feminine characteristics.

Берёза - Birch

Amongst all the trees in the forest, the birch tree is most closely associated with femininity and female-centered rituals. A tall slender white trunk topped with a crown of lush leaves undoubtedly inspired a belief that the birch embodies the traditionally-perceived feminine traits of beauty, youth and fertility. Russian philology scholar Yelena V. Puchkova notes the prevalence of birch trees symbolizing feminine principles, girlhood and purity in numerous rituals and folkloric texts, thus perpetuating the stable comparison between a birch tree and an elegant girl.²⁸ Indeed, linguist Vladimir N. Vakurov posited that birch trees were symbolic of girlish beauty in the period of feminine life prior to the departure from her parental home.²⁹ A traditional folk song highlights the connection between the tree and young girls, but also the connotation that the tree itself is a female. It states, "The birch ordered the girls: Come, you girls! Come on, red ones! I will dress myself. I'll put on a dress, everything is green."³⁰ At the same time, birch tree symbolism signified married women as well, as it symbolizes women's passage from

²⁷ Borisova, p. 37.

²⁸ Puchkova, p. 264.

²⁹ Vakurov, Vladimir, N., 'Belaya berezka nizko k zemle klonitsya' (The White Birch Leans Low to the Ground), *Russkaya Rech'* (Russian Speech) 5 (1986), p. 126.

³⁰ Vakurov, p. 123.

carefree daughter to the role of mother and wife.³¹ This important association between life transitions and ancestors will become explored below with the rituals of Semitskaya Week.

A certain theurgy evolved around the birch tree due to its feminine connection, wherein Eastern Slavic folklore positions birch trees as intercessory agents between girls, their ancestors, and the spirit world. In a context where World Trees connect the cosmos to the underworld, it is logical that Slavic peoples would bestow another tree with similar properties. Many fairy tales and elements of folkloric belief show a deceased young girl or woman transitioning into a birch tree and acting as an intermediary between the living and the spirit world.³² For example, in the Finnish-Russian fairy tale *The Wonderful Birch*, a 'good wife' was transformed into a black sheep by a witch who subsequently took the shape of the unfortunate woman. The witch demanded that the 'good husband' slaughter the black sheep, not knowing that the couple's daughter knew the secret that her mother was in ovine form. With warning from her daughter, the mother accepted her fate but cautioned her child not to touch any of the meat. A birch tree sprung up where her bones were laid - a birch that acted as a problem solver and gift-giver until the 'good wife' could take her human form again.³³ On the other hand, a local legend from the Rechitsa Polissya area of Belarus provides a more sinister connection to this theme. After a woman murdered her husband, God ordered the woman into a field to 'become like a birch and cry with your hands down.' Birch sap is the tears of this unfortunate woman.³⁴ One can observe here the relationship between the female character, birch trees, life cycles, and the symbolic (and holistically useful) sap that flows in the early days of spring.

The connection between birch trees and life cycles is more evident when placed into the context of mythological traditions and deities of ancient Slavs. It is necessary to explore these early beliefs as they influenced folk culture, ritual, and the folk calendars used in a contemporary context. A strong example of this female-centered worship is the goddess cult of the natural spiritual force known as the Bereginya — one of the first natural entities to be worshipped by the Slavs. In the 'Sermon by St. Gregory, Found in the Comments, on How the Ancient Nations, When Pagan, Worshipped Idols and Offered Sacrifices to Them, and Continue to Do So Now,' translated into Old Church Slavonic in the eleventh century, the author notes "These Slavs started making offerings to Rod' and Rožanicý before Perun, their god, and before then to the vampires and Beregyni."³⁵ As a very early divine essence, Bereginya is sometimes mentioned as the source from where

³¹ Kolosova, Valeria B., 'Bereza v slavyanskoy dukhovnoy kul'ture i bytu' (Birch in Slavic Spiritual Culture and Life), *Nauka* (Science) 15 (2015) pp. 33-82; in the electronic format uploaded by author found at www.academia.edu, p. 5.

³² Borisova, p. 37.

³³ Lang, Andrew. "The Wonderful Birch" in *The Red Fairy Book* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1890), pp. 123-132.

³⁴ Usacheva, p. 191. Second citation for validation of legend: Piatkevich, 2004 as cited in Kolosova, 'Bereza v slavyanskoy dukhovnoy', p. 6.

all life has sprung. She is known as "the great goddess who gave birth to all things."³⁶ Despite mentions from the writings of Christian missionaries, few definite characteristics are known about the deity, and national lore consequently shaped how the natural entity is viewed. In Eastern Slavic folklore, Bereginya is represented by a birch tree and is the embodiment of heavenly radiance and light.³⁷ A noteworthy point of consideration here is that the Proto-Slavic root of *beryoza* (birch) is **berza* which in turn is sourced from the Indo-European base of **bherǵos*, *bherǵā* meaning shine, light, or a white colour.³⁸ As an essence rooted in nature, Bereginya was considered to be an ambivalent force that is associated with both fertility and death as well as being beneficial or harmful to humans.³⁹ In the case of Bereginya, focus on the root of *берегъ* (*bereg*) or riverbank has thus compelled some scholars to conclude that Beregyni were water spirits.⁴⁰ This is a key point to consider as the water sprites known as the rusalki were said to live on low-hanging birch branches.

At the same time, there is an abundance of Eastern Slavic folklore that prioritizes birch trees in their mystical role as magical protectresses. Modern folklorists and popular accounts prefer to focus on the seeming commonality of *beryoza* and the Russian verb *беречь* (*berech'*), meaning to keep safe or protect. Certainly, folklore captures numerous ways that birch trees, their bark, or their branches were used as protective charms around Slavic homesteads. It was a general belief across the region that birch branches placed under the roof of a house or left in an attic offered security from bad weather, primarily lightning strikes, and branches left in fields safeguarded against pests.⁴¹ In Ukraine, it was believed that the Trinity tree (a ceremonial birch selected for Rusal'naia Week) had even stronger protective essences, particularly that it could block the entrance of witches and sorcerers into homes and villages.⁴²

Whilst these last are acts of protection, birch trees were available to all and this possibility accordingly means that the tree was equally of use to maleficent phantoms and witches in Eastern Slavic folklore. Specific entities that are portrayed in Slavic folklore as mischief-makers, villains, or simply antagonists in fairy tales make use of birch trees. In Slavic mythology, the people believed that 'forest devils' predominantly lived in the tops of birch trees and *Leshiye* (jokester forest deities or demons charged with the protection

³⁵ "Sermon by Saint Gregory, Found in the Comments, on How the Ancient Nations, When Pagan, Worshipped Idols and Offered Sacrifices to Them, and Continue to Do So Now", 4.22.1 in *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, ed. Juan Antonio Álvarez-Pedrosa (Leiden, Brill, 2021), 366.

³⁶ Avtandil Ağbaba, 'Kul't dereva v mifologii tyurkskikh i slavyanskikh narodov' (Tree Cult in the Mythology of the Turkic and Slavic Peoples), *East European Scientific Journal* 6:70 (2021), p. 35.

³⁷ Ağbaba, p. 35.

³⁸ Kolosova, p. 1.

³⁹ See note 282 in 'Texts in East Old Slavonic' in *Sources of Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, p. 366.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ M. Malokha, 1998, p. 67 as cited in Kolosova, p. 15.

⁴² V.K. Sokolova, 1979, p. 209 as cited in Kolosova, p. 13.

of the forest and animals) held much power in Russian birch forests.⁴³ Additionally, the dominant caricature of a Slavic witch in folklore and fairy tales, Baba Yaga, has a strong connection to birch woodlands while also having a connection to both death and growth. She is typically portrayed as dwelling in a foreboding hut in mysterious, dark birch forests.⁴⁴ Once again, it is evident that the feminine folklore related to birch trees unites concepts of light –in this case growth – with darkness and death, as examples include those which centre on the relationship between the trees and the untimely death of women.

Out of all female mythological deities or folk characters, the rusalki are the most connected with birch trees and related rituals in Eastern Slavic folklore and reconstructions of it that emerged between the 18th and 19th centuries. Linda Ivanits' research shares that these spirits could come in many shapes and live in different landscapes: in Smolensk, a peasant reported hearing one (or what they thought to be one) cry in the forest; in northern Russia they are presented as dripping mermaid-like women; and some were even said to be located in fields.⁴⁵ In the contemporary context, they are most often depicted or understood to be in their mermaid form. This manifestation connects them to the Bereginya, though extensive study by renowned Russian linguist and ethnographer Dmitry K. Zelenin offered a gloomier explanation. Zelenin posits that these female cacodemons were linked to the concept of the unclean dead or individuals who experienced untimely deaths and did not receive a proper burial. For the most part, those likely to join the astral plane of the rusalki were the unresting souls of deceased young women, girls, or infants.⁴⁶ These unhappy souls spent much of their time in aquatic environments, but their otherworldly nature allowed for transcendence into the terrestrial world, where they would visit trees, fields and the homes of ancestors.⁴⁷ It is said that birch branches and leaves that hang close to the ground are homes of rusalki.⁴⁸ This perception subsequently informed Slavic folk convictions that the birch tree ties the mystical world with the human realm.

Tree veneration in Eastern Slavic folklore contributed to the celebration of seasonal festivals, and the birch reigned supreme as the forest queen in cultural festivities that occurred in spring. Bereshchenye (Берещенье) is an annual folk holiday celebrated on 11 April in the modern New Style calendar and 29 March in the Old Style. It does not have

⁴³ Varner, Gary R., *The Mythic Forest, the Green Man, and the Spirit of Nature* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2006), p. 57.

⁴⁴ Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, Malgorzata, 'Baba Yaga, the Witch from Slavic Fairy Tales' in *Fierce Feminine Divinities of Eurasia and Latin America: Baba Yaga, Kali, Pombagira, and Santa Muerte* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), p. 17.

⁴⁵ Ivanits, Linda, *Russian Folk Belief* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 76.

⁴⁶ Dynda, Jiří, 'Rusalki: Anthropology of Time, Death, and Sexuality in Slavic folklore', *Studia Mythologica Slavica* 20:1 (2017) p. 84.

⁴⁷ Dynda, p. 84.

⁴⁸ Borisova, p. 37.

any particular feminine customs, but rather, it is a day of general reverence towards the birch tree itself.⁴⁹ An early spring day was selected as early Slavic peoples believed that the trees awakened from their winter slumber at that time of the year and were ready to share their juices. It is telling just how the early Eastern Slavs were attuned to natural processes in their home environment and development of birch trees. In the Old Russian language, the month of April was known as *березозоль* (berezozol'), a discernible linguistic association with the tree.⁵⁰ The modern Ukrainian language also carries this history as the month of March is known as *березень* (berezen'). In the folk calendar overlaid with religious content from the cult of saints, Bereshchenye is associated with Saint Ivan the Hermit.⁵¹ Villagers would traverse out to the forests and 'listen' to the essence of the birch trees to know whether their sap had begun to drip.⁵² Families would stock up on birch sap to create drinks and for medicinal purposes. Buds and branches were collected as traditional healers believed they could be steeped into a healing tea that was offered to the sick.

Rites during the springtime festival of Semitskaya Week or Green Holidays (it is also known Troitsa in the folk calendar) are extremely reliant on birch symbolism. Modern folklorists note that Rusal'naia Week is an old name for the festivities.⁵³ It is generally understood that this week-long celebration occurs in early June or the week before or after Pentecost - the seventh Sunday after Paskha (Easter).⁵⁴ Birch trees were central to the rites and rituals of this week as they are especially lush at this time, are connected to fertility, considered to host deceased souls of ancestors, and their low-hanging branches were the abodes of rusalki. Rusal'naia Week is said to celebrate both the cult of the dead and spring agricultural celebrations, so it ties into discussed birch symbolism.

Zelenin notes that these holidays were linked with the growth of rye in the fields where it is believed the rusalki would sit.⁵⁵ He also notes the interesting observation that Belarusian peasants believed that these mermaid-like beings guarded the rye fields almost as spiritual protectresses.⁵⁶ This transition from riverbank abode and low hanging birch trees to rye fields illustrates the belief that the unclean dead wandered in the world of the living at this special time. Ukrainian folk beliefs offered the view that God released the dead from the netherworld even as the human world bloomed.⁵⁷ Indeed, general

⁴⁹ Budur, Natalia V., *Russkiy narodnyy kalendar'* (Russian Folk Calendar) (Moscow: Olma-Press, 2005), p. 190.

⁵⁰ Kolosova, p. 3.

⁵¹ Budur, p. 190.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 579.

⁵⁴ Dynda, p. 84.

⁵⁵ Zelenin, Dmitry K., *Izbrannyye trudy: Ocherki russkoy mifologii: umershiye neyestestvennoy smert'yu i rusalki* (Selected Works: Essays on Russian Mythology: Those Who Died an Unnatural Death and Rusalki) (Moscow: Indrik, 1995) p. 250.

⁵⁶ Zelenin, p. 250.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Eastern Slavic folklore shared that the rusalki were especially active in the realm of mortals during Rusal'naia Week, so it was best to be careful. Rusalki were viewed as dangerous and unclean due to their association with the dead so swimming, building fences, and sowing fields were prohibitions observed.⁵⁸ One can easily sense the belief in magic in the Eastern Slavic communities at this time year, especially when the growing season was of such importance for subsistence. The belief that the living world and purgatory could intersect, or at least more strongly so, at specific times of the year presented an additional layer of danger to an already austere existence reliant on nature. In earlier days, Eastern Slavic peoples followed rites and rituals based on myth as a means to placate unseen forces that could tip fortune against them. Now these days are celebratory notes on the folk calendar.

Women and girls were protagonists in the rites associated with birch trees during Rusal'naia Week.⁵⁹ At the same time, Vakurov highlights that the birch tree is celebrated as the main heroine of a joyful summer holiday commemorating the transition of spring into the full force of summer.⁶⁰ Scholars note that while festivities across regions differed, they all shared birch tree rituals, offices for the dead usually held on Semik Thursday, and ceremonial farewell of the rusalka.⁶¹ Lush natural abundance was celebrated by bringing birch branches into homes as magical decorations as Eastern Slavic peoples were aware of their demon eschewing mystical properties. Young girls ventured out into the forest to a select birch tree to act as the Semik birch for the entirety of the festival; this tree routinely remained in the forest but in some locales, it was brought into the village.⁶² Then, the girls would 'curl wreaths' (create wreaths), sing songs about the charm of spring or love, dance the *khоровод* (a circle dance) around the birch, and dress the tree in ribbons and linen towels so that it resembled the beautiful young woman that Eastern Slavic folklore considered it to be.

However, the dressed-up Semik birch was more than just a charmingly adorned intercessional object for ritual, just as birch trees in the woodlands were not mere plants. They were meant to act as an intermediary between the living and netherworld, connecting young girls to their ancestors. Zelenin reports that in the Korochansky District in Belgorod Oblast, girls would weave the tops of two young birches together and say, "Hello godfather and godmother, curled birch!"⁶³ Further, birch trees played a role in fomenting living-world relationships during the festivities. Ivanits notes that young girls engaged in swearing eternal vows of friendship and sisterhood.⁶⁴ Indeed, the practice of *кумление* (*kumleniye*) has been pinpointed as an activity that occurred in central Russia,

⁵⁸ Ivanits, p. 79.

⁵⁹ Borisova, p. 37.

⁶⁰ Vakurov, p. 126.

⁶¹ Ivanits, 79.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Zelenin, p. 280.

⁶⁴ Ivanits, p. 79.

parts of Ukraine and Belarus as one component of the festivities. Girls would exchange wreaths (in some customs, girls would kiss between wreaths) in front of the birch in the forest, transition their relationship to that of sisters or godmothers, and eat a feast under the birch tree.⁶⁵ The practice of *kumleniye* provided an excellent opportunity for local village girls to strengthen their community relationships so that there were partnerships based on collective experience and womanhood.

The festival celebrating the transition from spring to summer culminated with the farewell to the *rusalki* who returned to their riverbanks and aquatic homes. Birch trees that budded in spring and showcased their luxurious greenery in summer would soon have to share the forest with trees laden with colourful berries. Other trees would be venerated in other folk holidays over the summer and autumn. However, the rituals of the Green Holidays performed in the presence of birch trees are noteworthy because they denote the association between women and this genus of trees.

Tenets expressed about birch trees, such as their associations with femininity, fertility, and the perception of their role as a perceived *axis mundus* connecting ancestors with their living relatives, are apparent in one of the early manifestations of the rites of spring. The central nature of women to these ceremonies demonstrates the vastly accepted cultural suppositions that birches were feminine, and this notion has been entrenched in natural folklore for generations. Once again, it is evident that birch trees represented a connection between the living and the dead, chiefly among women. Decorations, singing, dancing and feasting are all generally viewed as celebratory, but the inclusion of a somewhat dark entity, the *rusalki*, highlights there is an element of sadness in these springtime rites. One must recognize that this is the time of year where young women would transition away from one set of qualities inherent in birch symbolism (purity, youth, beauty), and mature into wives and maternal members of their communities.

Рябина - Rowan or Mountain Ash

The rowan or mountain ash is another tree that features prominently in Eastern Slavic folklore as connected to feminine elements. Similar to the birch, the mountain ash is thought to have been bestowed with its gender due to physical characteristics that early people viewed as intrinsically womanlike. A slender trunk topped with lush foliage, like brilliant tresses of hair, and seasonal berries of a bright red hue resembling rosy cheeks inspired Eastern Slavs to believe the mountain ash resembled a young woman. Indeed, Eastern Slavic folklore associates it with youth and beauty.⁶⁶ Another view is that the tree was considered feminine due to the strong red colour of its bitter berries.⁶⁷ There are also folkloric tales or legends that locate the tree as a symbolic representations of specific girls

⁶⁵ Zelenin, p. 279.

⁶⁶ Agapkina, Tatyana A., 'Ryabina' (Rowan) in *Slavyanskiye drevnosti: Etnolingvisticheskiy slovar' v 5-ti tomakh - Tom 4. P- C* (Slavic Antiquities: Ethnolinguistic Dictionary in 5 Volumes - Volume 4. P-S), ed. O.V. Belova (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyye otnosheniya, 2009), p. 515.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 515.

or women, but this could simply be the case because the noun was classified as feminine first.⁶⁸ An overview of widely known East Slavic anecdotes about the origins of the tree and folk beliefs will demonstrate its connection to feminine essences and superstitions.

There are Eastern Slavic legends about the female-centered nature of the mountain ash, but they involve misfortune falling upon a woman, death, or even the transition to a tree itself. As a consequence, the tree has become a literary symbol in Slavic prose as a way to express yearning, joyless lives, and girls handed over for marriage against their will.⁶⁹ There is a general folk belief that individual rowan trees were once young girls who met an untimely death, so it is forbidden to cut such a tree, as to not disturb the soul resting in it. Indeed, in Brest, Belarus, this belief strengthens the taboo into a sin.⁷⁰ There is an additional origin story, also sourced in Belarus, that mentions Biblical characters, relating that the mountain ash has red berries because they are the bloody tears that fell from Eve's eyes when she and Adam were expelled from Heaven.⁷¹ Generally, across the Eastern Slavic region, common folkloric elements share a vengeful mother-in-law transforming her daughter-in-law into a rowan. The young husband finds out about the ill-deeds of his mother once he cuts into the tree (as ordered by the matriarch), it spews blood, and the tree explains what had occurred.⁷² Tales like this seem to be the source of popular legends that associate the mountain ash with loving couples who ultimately meet an unfortunate fate. Stories such as these are more prominently shared by entertainment and popular websites when rowan-related days mark the folk calendar. For those unfamiliar with the traditional folklore of their regions, tales of unfortunate lovers may be the most prominent due to their widespread dissemination. These tales and the overall belief that the rowan is innately linked to feminine death resulted in a symbolism that is less celebratory than the birch. Rowan is therefore associated with female unhappiness and tragic fate.⁷³

Eastern Slavs deemed the rowan an extremely magical tree, but this was not a phenomenon unique to the region. There are parallel beliefs with Finno-Ugric, Baltic, Scandinavian and Germanic peoples.⁷⁴ Spiritual practices from this region demonstrate that the relationship with the tree was complex. On one hand, it symbolized female misfortune, but on the other hand, people believed that the mountain ash could revive their health as well as offer protection against dark spirits. This contradiction is visible in

⁶⁸ Agapkina, Tatyana A., 'Simvolika derev'yev v traditsionnoy kul'ture slavyan: ryabina' (Symbolic functions of trees in Slavic traditional culture: rowan) in *Etnobotanika: rasteniya v yazyke i kul'ture* (Ethnobotanica: Plants in Language in Culture) ed. N.N. Kazansky (St. Petersburg: Nauka, 2010), p. 239-240.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 241.

⁷⁰ Agapkina, 'Ryabina,' p. 515.

⁷¹ Agapkina, in 'Ryabina' in *Slavyanskiye drevnosti*, p. 515.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Agapkina, 'Simvolika derev'yev-ryabina', p. 242.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 238.

local folk customs concerning whether to have rowan planted near a home. Agapkina notes that it was forbidden to plant the rowan tree near homes in villages due to its association with calamity.⁷⁵ However, in the locality of Zaonezhye, which is now part of a district in modern Karelia, villagers believed planting rowan near houses would protect them from demons.⁷⁶ Found in the forest, mountain ash was said to be particularly powerful against one problematic forest entity - the Leshy. Meanwhile, in northern Russia, there was a belief that a whip with a wooden handle made of rowan could drive away the woodland prankster.⁷⁷ Indeed, it is noted in folk calendars that a branch from a mountain ash protected against the evil eye and could safely guide someone home from the depths of the forest.⁷⁸ Whilst the Eastern Slavic territories are renowned for their thick forests, it is peculiar that northerners located in even denser timberland cite the magical protective properties of rowan more than in other locales.

The mountain ash was also a renowned Eastern Slavic folk remedy for toothache and dental issues. Its use was widespread, and rituals varied across communities, where the single commonality was seeking help from the rowan. A ritual occurred in which a suffering person would traverse to the forest, kneel, pray, kiss, chew a piece of rowan bark, and recite the incantation, Рябинушка-матушка, возьми мою болезнь, я никогда тебя не буду есть! (Ryabinushka-matushka, voz'mi moyu bolezni', ya nikogda tebya ne budu yes'! - Rowan-mother, take my illness, I will never eat you!)⁷⁹ Two important observations arise from this magic spell: 1. the reference to the mountain ash as a mother 2. the call to it for assistance. Eastern Slavic peoples knew the tree itself could not help them, but rather they sought remedies from the spirit world. In Eastern Slavic mythology, it is generally considered that the mountain ash acted as an intermediary connecting a person to otherworldly forces.⁸⁰ This echoes qualities of the birch trees, which were also stated to be feminine and act as a portal to ancestors.

Still, the mountain ash is a sacred tree that received reverence in Eastern Slavic communities and which continues to conjure attention in rituals listed in modern folk calendars. Two key festivities celebrated the rowan, motivating locals to gather and engage in theurgistic rites based on the belief that the mountain ash was an especially magical tree. Рябиновка (Ryabinovka) is celebrated on 25 May in the New Style and 12 May in the Old Style annually. The folk calendar also lists the day under the name Епифан (Epifan).⁸¹ This day is typically viewed as a birthday for rowan trees as early spring is generally the time when they present lush white blossoms to the world. Folk meteorology of the region noted that if blooms arrived later than usual, autumn would linger - Рябина

⁷⁵ Agapkina, in 'Ryabina' in *Slavyanskiye drevnosti*, p. 515.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 518.

⁷⁷ Agapkina, in 'Ryabina' in *Slavyanskiye drevnosti*, p. 518.

⁷⁸ Budur, p. 275.

⁷⁹ Agapkina, 'Simvolika derev'yev-ryabina', p 248.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 247.

⁸¹ Budur, p. 274.

расцветает позднее обычного - к долгой осени (Ryabina rastsvetayet pozdneye obychnogo - k dolgoy oseni).⁸² Female symbolism is abundant in the superstitions and rituals of this folk holiday.

A commonly known alternate name for the holiday is Красный кафтан (Krasnyy kaftan/red caftan). A *sarafan* or *vyshyvanka* are traditional types of dresses or tunics worn by Eastern Slavic women and girls (though they were once worn by men too) that resemble the loose-fitting shape of a caftan. This is notable because the dress was used a metaphor for the rising sun on the morning of Ryabinovka. There was a mystical belief that if the sun rose on a clear day - 'wearing a red kaftan' - that the summer would be hot, dry, and have a lot of forest fires.⁸³ In the early morning hours of Ryabinovka, girls would gleefully go to the rowan tree whilst clothed in red sarafans where they would dance and sing. It was there they would ask the tree to protect their home from fires.⁸⁴ Other special rituals were conducted by villagers that were not particularly related to women, but to the feminine protective powers of the mountain ash.

The folk calendar informs that the mountain ash has grander festivities later in the year. It is generally accepted that the first Рябинник (Ryabinnik) occurs on 27 August in the Old Style and 9 September in the New Style.⁸⁵ This folk holiday is followed by the second (and final of the autumn festivities related to rowan) outing known as Пётр и Павел – Рябинники (Peter and Paul Ryabinniki) celebrated on 23 September in the New Style and 10 September in the Old Style. Folk Orthodoxy associates the day with Saints Peter and Paul, Bishops of Nicaea.⁸⁶ Ryabinnik was celebrated in a similar way like Ryabinovka; the key difference rests in the fact that, by this time of season, the blooms have matured into berries, the trees are heavy with red clusters of their typically bitter fruits, and they paint the landscape with flashes of red by September. A common Eastern Slavic folk omen advises that strawberries were consumed in late June, but once autumn and the day of Peter arrived, it is time to eat rowan berries — С Петрова дня летнего ешь землянику, а с осеннего — рябину! (S Petrova dnya letnego yesh' zemlyaniku, a s osennego — ryabinu!)⁸⁷

Those familiar with the fruit will have encountered the common phenomenon across the Northern Hemisphere that rowan berries become sweeter after the first frosts. Eastern Slavic people ventured out into the forests to collect berries and branches, while the

⁸² Reshetnikov, Nikolay I., *Russkiy narodnyy kalendar': Obychai obryady imena* (Russian Folk Calendar: Customs, Rites, Names) (Moscow: Olma Press, 2005), p. 597.

⁸³ Budur, p. 275.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 429. See also Reshetnikov, p. 293.

⁸⁶ Reshetnikov, p. 318.

⁸⁷ GISMeteo, 'Ryabina otmechayet svoi imeniny' (Rowan Celebrates Its Name Day), 23 September 2012, accessed on 10 September 2022. <https://www.gismeteo.ru/news/sobytiya/ryabina-otmechaet-svoii-imeniny/> (Used as source to demonstrate commonly used proverb.)

branches, heavy with fruit, were tied into bunches to be hung under the roofs of houses, barns and gates as amulets.⁸⁸ This practice falls in line with the belief that the tree has mystical protective properties; placing its foliage in abodes where family and animals live meant they would be shielded from misfortune and dark forces. Women transformed the rowanberry crop into delicious delicacies. Most prominently, they made jam, kvass, and liquors.⁸⁹ Pies and cakes feature on the menu — there are numerous recipes for рябиновый пирог (ryabinovyy pirog/rowanberry pie) that could only be made at this time of year. While women collected the berries, decorated their homes and created charms, there was a caveat against the over-collection of rowan fruits. It was advised that most of the bright red bounty be left for forest animals, particularly small birds, for their winter sustenance or one would face bad luck.

The mythology around the origins of the mountain ash firmly demonstrate that it is considered to be a female tree in Eastern Slavic folklore. At the same time, its association with femininity is not especially light, but rather tragic and unfortunate. Associations with blood, sadness, and death symbolically act as metaphors for the life transitions of women marked by rituals and rites. People are expected to have a balanced relationship with the rowan — they can take her gifts of berries, but in moderation, or face misfortune. At the same time, folklore around this tree links feminine essences with protection and this is intrinsically a sign of power. Another aspect of mythical omnipotence is that the rowan was considered to be an agent between the living world and the spiritual realm, prompting Eastern Slavs to approach it to beseech favours. Rowan may have a mixed reputation in terms of whether to keep it nearby or left in the forest, but it is indeed a feminine tree of remarkable note in folklore.

Липа - Linden

There are numerous reasons why early Slavs considered the linden to be a feminine tree. Firstly, unlike the hard, durable wood from a traditionally masculine oak tree, linden has particularly soft wood. Secondly, linden blossoms are used to create honey - a sweet substance correlated with fertility since ancient times. Heart-shaped leaves, a slender trunk and a lush crown of foliage support the notion that the outward appearance of the tree is in line with other trees the Eastern Slavic peoples classified as feminine. However, the association of the tree with women and femininity is not entirely positive. Ukrainian legends posit that linden is a tree associated with unhappiness and the sharp tongues of women because God gave it the power to absorb hexes meant for men that originated from angry women. As a means to withstand these female-uttered curses, linden trees developed a gnarled tree trunk, and thus lost their beauty.⁹⁰ So, this particular tree was

⁸⁸ Reshetnikov, p. 318.

⁸⁹ Budur, p. 429-430.

⁹⁰ Agapkina, Tatyana and Valeria V. Usacheva, 'Lipa' (Linden) in *Slavyanskiye drevnosti: Etnolingvisticheskiy slovar' v 5-ti tomakh - Tom 3. K-II* (Slavic Antiquities: Ethnolinguistic Dictionary in 5 Volumes - Volume 3. K-P) ed. Nikita Tolstoy, (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyye otnosheniya, 2004), p. 113.

categorized as feminine, but it did not carry the connotations of beauty or youth like the birch or the rowan.

Folkloric tales about the origins of linden offer insight into its connection to women. One tale involves a peasant girl who was violated and murdered in the forest. A linden tree grew out of her knee and villagers venerated this mystical tree; however, a local priest disagreed with the idolization of the tree and went to chop it down. Blood spilled at the first cut of the axe and the priest immediately begged for forgiveness.⁹¹ In Belarus, the origin legend about the magic tree is Christian-based. Local myth offers that the linden is a holy tree because the Mother of God rested upon it during a transitory journey to Heaven.⁹² Alternatively, it is also believed that the linden sheltered the Mother of God and Jesus during the Flight into Egypt.⁹³ Whilst not of Eastern Slavic ethnicity, Borisova mentions a folk song of the Chuvash people of the Volga-Ural region of Siberia that shares, "The old linden standing on the edge of the forest, do not chop it, what if this is our mother? The young linden tree standing in the middle of the forest, do not chop it, what if this is our elder sister?"⁹⁴ Other regional fables are not abundant with female imagery (though the tree has the pronoun of she), but rather with bear symbolism. The fairy tales *Откуда взялись медведи* (*Otkuda vzyalis' medvedi*) or *От чего пошли медведи* (*Ot chego poshli medvedi/Where Bears Came From*) and *Медведь – липовая нога* (*Medved' – lipovaya noga/Linden Foot Bear*) display this other important connection.

The pliability of linden wood contributed to the folk belief that the tree acted as a maternal figure. Slavic peoples, inside and outside of the territories under discussion, perceived the tree to act as a mothering figure in the forest because it provided raw materials for many necessities of life. Linden wood was used for construction materials; furniture pieces such as tables; dishware and utensils; rope; footwear; beehives frames, and numerous church goods.⁹⁵ These unique traits led villagers to consider linden trees to be a sort of 'holy, kind, and generally friendly to humans' genus of the plant world.⁹⁶

Nonetheless, contradictions in the perception of softness are also apparent in Eastern Slavic folklore. Soft and supple qualities were deemed desirable in terms of construction of some goods, but, also, they were viewed as signs of weakness. The linden came to represent people, objects, or lifestyles that were "short lived, weak, and poor."⁹⁷ Agapkina shares a humorous, sarcastic quote from the Perm region of Russia: "I became

⁹¹ Agapkina and Usacheva, 'Lipa', in *Slavyanskiye drevnosti*, p. 113.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Borisova, p. 39.

⁹⁵ Agapkina, Tatyana A., 'Simvolika derev'yev v traditsionnoy kul'ture slavyan: lipa' (Symbolic functions of trees in Slavic traditional culture: linden), *Slavyanskiy al'manakh* (Slavic Almanac) 3-4 (2018), p. 364.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 360.

rich: instead of patent leather boots, I put on linden ones," meaning that the person still remained in poverty.⁹⁸ Whilst it is reasonable for soft wood to be viewed this way, this is a labyrinthine perspective in terms of the gender of the tree. It can be acknowledged that dated cultural perceptions of women viewed their perceived softness as physical weakness in comparison to men. However, the connection between the linden and the Mother of God seemingly overrides any such connotations because she is deemed an extremely powerful figure in Orthodoxy and Catholicism.

Eastern Slavic folklore is abundant with examples of the linden as a magical tree from the perspective of folk Orthodox Christianity, in its role as an intermediary for health benefits, as protection against lightning, and in its ability to repel evil forces. For example, it was a common practice to build churches or install crosses in spots where old linden trees once stood, just as these holy trees were often planted near churches and temples.⁹⁹ These activities align with the folk belief that the linden was the holiest of all tree species. As well, an attitude that the tree was connected to heavenly powers and was considered friendly to humans motivated Slavic peoples to seek help to soothe specific maladies from the linden. Rather than using parts of the tree medicinally, people sought help from the living object spiritually. It was a commonly held folk belief that local healers transferred diseases from the afflicted to linden trees.¹⁰⁰ Two prominent folk medicine examples from the Polissya area of Ukraine featured circling the tree: children suffering from infirmities, primarily insomnia, were carried around the tree and women seeking to rid themselves of infertility walked circles around an old linden.¹⁰¹

A tree that was regarded as holy as well as useful for health and construction purposes ultimately meant that Slavic peoples preferred to have linden in their close environments; since they felt the tree brought happiness, they held no fears about planting it near their homes.¹⁰² Planting this particular species of tree near homes also provided a secondary blessing - protection from lightning. It was a widely held folk belief that lightning did not strike linden, so it was placed near buildings and people were unafraid to hide under it during a thunderstorm.¹⁰³ Whilst not sourced from the territories in eastern Europe, there is a Southern Slavic legend from Slovenia wherein the linden tree once asked God to direct all the lightning at her as a way to prevent lightning strikes on nearby churches.¹⁰⁴ These examples portray a tree that while certainly revered for its helpful and protective properties as relating to matters experienced personally (ailments) or seen in the physical

⁹⁷ Agapkina, Tatyana A., *Derev'ya v slavyanskoy narodnoy traditsii: Ocherki* (Trees in Slavic Folk Tradition: Essays) (Moscow: Indrik, 2019), p. 127.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Agapkina and Usacheva, 'Lipa', in *Slavyanskiye drevnosti*, p. 112.

¹⁰⁰ Agapkina and Usacheva, 'Lipa' in *Slavyanskiye drevnosti*, p. 114.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 112.

¹⁰³ Borisova, p. 38.

¹⁰⁴ Agapkina, 'Simvolika derev'yev- lipa', p. 361.

world (location of churches and lightning) was also considered advantageous in combating perilous circumstances in the realm of the unseen.

Eastern Slavic peoples sought protection from unfortunate circumstances or devious spirits through a variety of rituals reliant on linden trees and branches. Whilst it is generally associated with the Mother of God, there was a time that it was revered by sorcerers and warlocks due to its protective properties, particularly related to lightning.¹⁰⁵ Further, myth advised people that rusalki rode on a bare linden bough.¹⁰⁶ Somewhere in the development of Eastern Slavic folklore, this familiar use by witches and wizards transitioned to a status where linden repelled them. Villagers used branches and crafted distinct amulets from linden to counter enchantments from witches, rusalki, and other demons. More specifically, advice that spanned generations advised listeners that witches lost their ability to shapeshift into werewolves once they were firmly whacked with a linden branch, and a woman could be released from spiritual possession in the same manner.¹⁰⁷ Additionally, it was a Russian folk custom to hang linden crosses on the neck of a person tormented by evil spirits.¹⁰⁸ Anecdotes from Chernihiv Polesie in Ukraine advised the way to leave linden branches and twigs scattered on the floors of dwellings to prevent the infiltration of the rusalki.¹⁰⁹

Other mystical uses of linden branches include being placed on a bed to protect an individual from longing for their deceased spouse, especially if they visited in the form of someone from the living dead; defence of women from evil spirits; hallucinations that took the form of a fiery serpent, and the safeguarding of farm animals as they grazed.¹¹⁰ There is even a belief about the use of linden around livestock: in the Starobilsk area of Ukraine, hitting cattle with a linden branch was prohibited based on the notion that the animals would die.¹¹¹ Indeed, these examples of mystical belief demonstrate that the linden was most certainly viewed as talismanic - a means to counter the perceived influence of entities that could cause misfortune. It is only in the development of folkloric belief that the religious aspects of the tree could be so tightly wound with its use as magical protection.

Linden played an important role in late spring and early summer traditional festivities, but the folk religious events that occurred in early autumn are most peculiar. Polish ethnographer Kazimierz Moszynski, who conducted much research in the region in the early twentieth century, observed that on the first week of September, villagers brought

¹⁰⁵ Agapkina and Usacheva, 'Lipa', in *Slavyanskiye drevnosti* p. 112.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Agapkina, 'Simvolika derev'yev- lipa', p. 362-363.

¹⁰⁸ Borisova, pg. 38.

¹⁰⁹ Agapkina and Usacheva, 'Lipa', in *Slavyanskiye drevnosti* p. 114.

¹¹⁰ Agapkina, 'Simvolika derev'yev- lipa', p. 363.

¹¹¹ Agapkina and Usacheva, 'Lipa', in *Slavyanskiye drevnosti* p. 114.

gifts and candles to a linden tree and go on to kiss it and bow as though it was a shrine.¹¹² Based on this knowledge and timing, and in consultation with the folk calendar, it seems feasible that the Slavs venerated the tree due to a specific holiday that falls into this general timeframe. On 8 September (Old Style), the Feast of the Nativity of the Mother of God is celebrated. At this time of the year, Eastern Slavic peoples readied to welcome the new season of autumn by preparing a large feast, indulging in a the celebration of the birth of such a holy woman.¹¹³ The close association between the linden tree and the Mother of God undoubtedly urged Slavic peoples to venerate her in their folk Christian practices as they believed this powerful maternal figure sat in the lush branches of the tree. Religious folk belief combined with lifestyles so innately tied to nature inspired Slavic peoples to believe that when they venerated a particular linden, they were pleading for the intercessory power of the Mother of God.

Concluding Thoughts

Pre-Christian Eastern Slavic peoples were not exceptional in their system of tree veneration and renowned Slavists opine that the practice was gained from and nuanced alongside neighbouring ethnicities. Nonetheless, it is apparent that trees feature prominently in Eastern Slavic mythology and folklore, with the understanding that trees represented people or acted as intermediaries to other spiritual realms. Trees were believed to be the home of ancestors, the swings of unclean spirits, and mythical protectors of important holy figures. This is an important point of reflection in terms of gender categorization and the purpose of rituals.

Whilst grammatical categorization may have played an early role in the symbolic gender of trees, traditional characteristics thought to be masculine or feminine applied to specific genera of trees, shaping how they were worshipped. In many cases, myth taught that certain sorts of trees were once female human beings or even offered residence for female divinities. This is evident in the mythical origin stories relayed above about birch, rowan, and linden trees. Further, perceptions of tree gender determined who engaged in specific rituals or who would be best served from the performance of certain rites. Folk practices, whether in celebratory holidays or medicinal purposes, typically associated feminine trees with female deities or their mortal sisters. Observations of particular actors in the Eastern Slavic folk calendar holidays reveal young girls were at the centre of Semitskaya Week with its mysticism heavily reliant on birch branches, women asked for protection from wildfires from the seemingly feminine rowan, and the Mother of God was figuratively visited on a linden on an early September day.

¹¹² Agapkina, *Derev'ya v slavyanskoy narodnoy*, p. 116.

¹¹³ Reshetnikov, p. 316.

In terms of folk celebrations, but not canonical religion, holidays like Bereshchenye, Ryabinovka, Peter and Paul Ryabinniki and the Feast of the Nativity of the Mother of God may not be widely commemorated anymore in Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia, but even their continued remembrance reveals fleeting glimmers of bygone reliance on the agricultural and natural calendars so important to life in the past. Additionally, these folk holidays offer contemporary audiences a chance to delve into ancient folkloric belief around trees - particularly the strong feminine essences connected to birch, rowan, and linden. Just as feminine trees in Eastern Slavic mythology acted as intercessory agents to the living world and the netherworld, folk holidays focused on trees today offer opportunities to explore national myth and feminine rituals of the past in the modern age.

About the Author

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