

Rusalki: Anthropology of time, death, and sexuality in Slavic folklore*

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The Eastern Slavic rusalki are feminine mythological beings commonly associated with water, death, and sexuality. They have been thoroughly ethnographically described, classified and compared. This paper presents a re-evaluation of D. K. Zelenin's classic interpretation of these beings as the souls of women deceased by untimely or unjust death. By means of analysis of their function and embedding in the entire social-cultural environment, it is shown how rusalki make sense in the symbolic system of East Slavic folklore. One of the main goals is to understand how intricately are rusalki and stories about them connected with the Orthodox liturgical year, specifically with the week following Pentecost. The paper concludes that these feminine revenants are symbolic representation of an eternal unripeness, which needed to be annually revived temporarily in order to help the symbolic system to cross the liminal phase of the agricultural and liturgical year cycle.

KEYWORDS: Slavic folklore; mythological beings; calendar time; liturgical year; death; revenantism; resurrection; sexuality; wedding ritual; cultural anthropology

In 2016, exactly one hundred years had passed since the first printing of D. K. Zelenin's ground-breaking study on Eastern Slavic mythological beings called *rusalki* (sg. *rusalka*).¹ Zelenin (1916 [1995])² convincingly showed how these beings were in the most essential way associated with the concept of the unclean dead (*založnye pokojniki*), i.e. those who died by unnatural or untimely death, were not allowed to be buried properly and became revenants. After examining a great deal of ethnographic evidence, he concluded that in Slavic folklore, the *rusalki* were conceptualized as the unrest souls of improperly deceased young women, girls, or infants.

* This paper was created within the project “Vývoj konceptů evropské kultury a myšlení v komparativní perspektivě umění a filosofie”, subproject “Rusalky: Antropologie smrti a sexuality ve slovanském folkloru” solved at Charles University in Prague from the Specific university research in 2016. This study was supported by the GA ČR 17-09663S: “Mýtus jako konstitutivní výjimka” project funded by the Czech Science Foundation.

¹ Throughout this paper, I use the scientific transliteration of various Cyrillic alphabets (also known as the International Scholarly System). Thus, I distinguish the transliteration of modern Russian *hard* and *soft sign* (“ and ‘) from the transliteration of Old Church Slavonic (OCS) *back* and *front jer* (ъ and ѣ).

² For a critical evaluation of Zelenin's mythological works, see Tolstoj 2003, 536–569.

This was a great step forward because until then, *rusalki* were in the 19th century dictionaries and encyclopaedias commonly described as “Slavic nymphs” or “Russian naiads”. They were correspondingly depicted as mythical water sprites, women with green hair, having a human upper part of the body, but with a fish-like tail instead of legs (cf. Pomeranceva 1970, 304–308). However, ethnographers were looking for these zoomorphic mermaids in East Slavic folklore to no avail. According to the popular folk beliefs, *rusalki* are unhappy souls of prematurely or tragically deceased maidens and women who reside in rivers, brooks, and swamps, but they are equally as aquatic as terrestrial, since they can sit on the tree-branches, run along the fields, woods, and meadows, or visit the homes of villagers. They are almost always believed to appear only in a certain period, the week before or after Pentecost (so called Rusalia Week, *rusal'naja nedelja*). They are deadly and dangerous for men, whom they seduce, tickle and kill, while at the same time they are associated with the flowering of crops and fertility of fields rather than with water, as such. All these features were in the 19th century usually described as “abnormalities”, or as mere distortion and “decline of the original” mermaid-like *rusalki* (Vinogradova & Levkieskaja 2012, 466–467).

Since the second half of the 19th century, many scholars rightfully questioned this attitude. And yet, these pioneers were still fascinated by the comparative opportunity the classical nymphic identification of *rusalki* provided. They interpreted them generally as a *dii manes*, the spirits of dead ancestors (Miklosich 1864; Afanas'ev 1869; Veselovskij 1889; Aničkov 1903; Gal'kovskij 1916 [2013]), but at the same time compared them zealously with the South Slavic *vily* or *samodivy* (Afanas'ev 1868), who scarcely seem to be ancestors. Only at the beginning of the 20th century and later, did the rapidly growing ethnographic evidence decisively show that the “Russian mermaids” were for the most part a literary chimaera (Zelenin 1995, 182–183; Pomeranceva 1970).³ The *dii manes* theory appeared as a more promising one, but even though it was radically reviewed by Zelenin, as will be demonstrated below, his ground-breaking interpretation of *rusalki* was still not able to help us to fully understand some of the *rusalki*'s characteristics, among others their sexuality, their relation with crop fertility, and, most importantly, it did not explain their link to the customs and rituals that took place during the Rusalia Week, the spring festivity associated with *rusalki*.

This paper is therefore going to focus on *rusalki*'s relations to death, sexuality, fertility, and calendar time in the context of East Slavic folklore. Among the ethnographic material we have at hand are (1) collective ritual songs from the spring period and holidays (*obrjadovye pesni*; see Miklosich 1864, 8–15; Zemcovskij 1970, 359–447) collected in 19th and 20th centuries, (2) prose narratives, such as *bylički* (memorates, i.e. 1st person narratives relating to personal experiences) and *byval'sčiny* (fabulates, i.e. 3rd person

³ Nevertheless, the romanticized image of the fish-like mermaid-*rusalki* during the 19th and 20th centuries was gradually imposed, by the literary influence, to the traditional culture and thus “re-folklorized” and later ethnographically recorded as living in the folklore tradition (Vinogradova & Levkieskaja 2012, 514–516), usually about the so-called *faraonki* or *beregini* (Pomeranceva 1970, 310); it also survived in 20th century literary works (Pomeranceva 1970, 315–317; Vinogradova 1989 [2000, 220–229]) and was re-folklorized in the West Slavic folklore, in which it had not previously been vernacular before

fictionalized narratives with a vestigial relation to actual beliefs) about meeting or seeing *rusalki* (see Zelenin 1995, 155–166, Ivanits 1992, 185–189, Vlasova 2015, 211–222, 712–717) collected mostly in the 20th century, and (3) the vast archive material from Polesia,⁴ usually one-sentence answers to the ethnographer’s questions on the nature and characteristics of *rusalki* (see Vinogradova & Levkieskaja 2012, 472–698).

Rusalki were recently studied by various scholars, either comparatively (Vinogradova 2000), or in respect to their associations with death (Zelenin 1995; Vinogradova & Levkieskaja 2012), sexual connotations (Moyle 1985; Rappoport 1999), water-spirit links (Vinogradova 2000), or calendar functions (Propp 1963; Agapkina 2002). However, these studies were either satisfied with a description, edition and classification of the data (e.g. Vinogradova & Levkieskaja 2012), or they settled on stressing just one semantic field while suppressing and reducing the others (e.g. Propp 1963; Moyle 1985).

This paper is divided into three sections, each dealing with one topic respectively, i.e. re-evaluating Zelenin’s model of *rusalka* as unclean dead at first, then re-interpreting some ideas on *rusalki*’s sexuality and eroticism, and finally rethinking their position in the Slavic folk – as well as liturgical – calendar rituals. In conclusion, the topic is re-interpreted in regard to the concepts of resurrection and revenantism, thus coming back to the death theme. I hope this approach will enable to interpret *rusalki* holistically in the perspective of cultural anthropology: seeing religion, folklore and calendar rituals not only as a part of a symbolic system and its inner interplay of symbols and representations, but as historically analysable practices in their sociological and ecological contexts (cf. Bourdieu 1977; Primiano 1995; Vásquez 2011; Harvey 2013).

ETYMOLOGY AND MORPHOLOGY

The name of *rusalki* is attested in numerous forms in the ethnographic records.⁵ There are attested many variations of the term *rusálka*⁶ itself (Polesian *rusávka*, *rusálaũka*, *rosáũka*, *rusál’nica*, Pol. *rusalka* or *rusawka*); variations of the Ukrainian *mávka* (Ukr. *návka*, Bel. *maũka*, Pol. *mawka*), which is a lexeme etymologically related to OCS *navь* or *navii*, “soul of the dead”; variations of their functional names, such as Rus. *ščekotálka* or *loskotũcha* (or *loskotóvka*, *loskotnica*, *loskotárka* – “the tickler”), Bel. *kupálka* (“the bather”), *kazýtka* or *smoljánka* (“the spoiler”), and Rus. *krivũcha* (“the crooked one”) or *železnjác̣ka* (“the iron one”).

⁴ Polesia (Rus. *Poles’je*, Bel. *Palesse*, Ukr. *Polissja*, Pol. *Polesie*) is the region on the borders of Ukraine and Belorussia, stretching from Poland on the West to Russia on the East. Polesia was believed to preserve very archaic traits of the Slavic folklore, mythology and demonology up until the 20th century, so between 1960’s and 1980’s an extensive ethnographic research was realized there by the team of Russian “ethnolinguistic school” of Tolstoj and his students Tolstaja, Vinogradova, Agapkina, Levkieskaja, Gura and many others. Currently, the ongoing research of what has been left in Polesia is organized by Ukrainian researchers under the supervision of Volodymyr Halaiczuk (cf. Preissová Krejčí, Máchalová & Skotáková 2015).

⁵ See Zelenin 1995, 142–148; Vinogradova 2000, 30–33; Vlasova 2008, 324, 327; Vinogradova 2009, 496; Vinogradova & Levkieskaja 2012, 468.

⁶ Accents will be marked only in this paragraph.

Several possible etymologies of the term *rusalka* were proposed since the 19th century. Some scholars thought it might have come from the substantive *ruslo*, ‘riverbed’, or from the adjective *rusyj/rusaja*, meaning ‘strawberry blond, golden (of hair)’ (e.g. Buslaev 1848, 15, 20; Gal’kovskij 1916 [2013, 42]; cf. discussion in Jagić 1909; Zelenin 1995, 142; Levko 2014). These etymologies were even recorded as folk etymologies, side by side with the derivation from *rosa*, ‘dew’. Franz Miklosich (1864) conclusively demonstrated, however, that the term is quite undoubtedly derived from the name of the spring festivity called in the OCS *rusal’ba*, *rusal’be*, or *rusalii*, which was according to his analysis borrowed to the OCS from the Latin *rosalia* via Medieval Greek *rusalia* (ῥουσάλια); *rusalia* (or *pascha rosata*, *pascha rosarum*, *dominica de rosa*) simply meant Pentecost, or, in this rendition, literally ‘Easter of Roses’.

Miklosich’s etymology is generally accepted even today and it implies a strong connection of *rusalki* with the festivity of *rusalia*, Pentecost. Nevertheless, while the name of *Rusalia* (as I will render it from now on) is recorded in the written sources ranging from the 12th to the 18th century (as a term for either “pagan” spring festivities and games, or for the Christian Pentecost), the derived substantive *rusal’ka* or *rusalka* as a term for a personified, feminine mythological being has, in contrast, been recorded only since the 17th century (Miklosich 1864, 16; Dynin 1994, 112, 114).⁷ Miklosich’s conclusion only shows that the term *rusalki* was not the indigenous name of these beings and it was appropriated from the name of the festivity.

Considering the typical morphology of *rusalki*, it needs to be emphasized that folklore never knows any canonical or conclusively “original” version of its contents. When we try to deduce a synthetic picture of *rusalka*, the first undeniable problem is the fact that there are considerable differences between the image of *rusalka* of the Southern/South-Western type (from Ukraine, Belarus and South-West Russia) and the feminine water-being of the Northern type (from Russian North, Volga, Ural, and Western Siberia regions).⁸ The invariant features of the “canonical” Southern type are: the feminine representation of *rusalki*, their seasonal appearance on the Trinity and Kupalo period, strong affiliation with the category of unclean dead, occurrence in rye fields, woods and nearby rivers or brooks, and also the tickling of men. They always appear in group, as a plurality. Southern *Rusalki* are usually described as young and beautiful girls. They can appear naked, or clothed in white (or wedding) robes. One of their most distinctive features is hair of green, golden, or strawberry blond colour.⁹ Their actions and other features shall be thoroughly discussed below.

⁷ The Slavic belief in feminine mythological beings was described by Procopius of Caesarea by means of *interpretatio Graeca* (“They also worship rivers, nymphs and other deities” – σέβουσι μέντοι καὶ ποταμούς τε καὶ νύμφας καὶ ἄλλα ἅπτα δαιμόνια; *De bello Gothico* III, 14, in: Ivanov & Litavrin 1994, 184). The ethnographic evidence for belief in South Slavic *vily* and *samodivj* reaches back to 12th-century sources, and Medieval Russian *beregini* (“guardians”) to 11th-century sources. On the Pan-Slavic comparative perspective, see Vinogradova 2000, 27–67 et passim. On Polish *comparanda*, see Peřka 1987, 92–105. *Contra* comparison, see Dynin 1994.

⁸ Vinogradova 2009, 495; first noted by Maksimov 1994, 86–89 [1903, 101–103].

⁹ See Zelenin 1995, 190–207; Vinogradova 2000, 34–57; Vlasova 2008, 448–464; Vinogradova 2009, 497–500; Vinogradova & Levkieskaja 2012, 599–645, 550–580.

Quite distinct from the Southern group is the Northern type of this being. In sources from the northern part of the East Slavic area, the word *rusalka* as such is not attested, but instead the lexemes *vodjanucha*, *vodjanica*, *kupalka*, *chitka*, or *štovka* are used for a mythical being with somewhat similar characteristics (Zelenin 1995, 146; Vinogradova 2009, 495) and thus not clearly identified with *rusalka*. *Vodjanucha* is solitary being, usually represented as an elderly and ugly woman with dark, wet hair, cold hands and saggy breasts. This Northern pseudo-*rusalka* does not have, symptomatically, any connection with the spring rituals taking place around Pentecost. This is an important fact and it is also the reason from this point on, this paper shall consider only the South-Western type of beings which are called *rusalki*.

DEATH

This all said, let us now proceed to the first semantic nest of the *rusalkian* complex – their undeniable associations with death and the afterlife.

As in many other cultures of the world, the East Slavic folk culture distinguishes between the two categories of death – the “good” and the “bad” one. A society usually attempts to control the unpredictable nature of biological individual death and through elaborate mortuary and funeral rituals tries to represent death as part of a repetitive cyclical order (Leach 1961, 182; Bloch & Parry 1982). “Good” death is a general pattern for the reproduction of life, “replicating a prototype to which all such deaths conform” (Bloch & Parry 1982, 15). The “bad” death, in contrast, is the one that does not conform to the pattern and thus clearly demonstrates the absence of control, and uncanny presence of arbitrariness, contingency, and/or volition that goes against the social order, procreation, regeneration and moral code of the society. The “bad” death comes as an untimely, unnatural, sudden, violent, tragic, or accidental event that ends life unexpectedly (cf. Klejn 2004, 265; Edwards 2015, 88–91). Especially the death of young people shows the tragic character of their loss of regenerative potential, which makes them unfit in the order of procreation and therefore “strange” – and prone to become revenants.

In Russian folklore, the “good” death (*chorošaja smert*’) is most commonly described as “own, proper” (*svoja*), “easy” (*legkaja*) or “happy” (*ščastlivaja*) death, while the unnatural, violent or otherwise strange “bad” (*plochaja*) death is called “un-proper” (*ne svoja*), or “hard” (*tjaželaja*), etc.¹⁰ Based on this opposition, we find the corresponding two classes of the deceased, as was most conclusively shown by Zelenin (1995, 39–128): (1) Those who died naturally, at the right time and reconciled with the world, become common ancestors (*roditeli*, *predki*, *rodnye pokojniki*) who dwell somewhere far way,

¹⁰ Cf. Vinogradova 1999; Agapkina 2002, 48–50; Vinogradova 2008; Vendina 2008. The Slavic word for “death” (e.g. Rus. *smert*’, Czech *smrt*, Polish *śmierć*, all from Proto-Slavic **smьrьtь*) is ultimately etymologically connected with the Sanskrit term *sumṛtaḥ*, meaning literally “‘a good death’”. Proto-Slavic prefix **sm-* here (cf. Sanskrit *su-*, Avestan *hu-*) has the meaning “‘proper, whole, healthy’”, or is connected with Proto-Slavic **svoi* “‘its own, proper’” (PIE **swe-*); **mьr-* is a zero-grade of the verbal root *mer-*, “‘to die’”. Cf. Machek 2010, 382, 562; and thoroughly with discussion *ESJS* 926–927.

out of this world, and come back to the world of the living only when they are ritually invited on the important holidays of the year, in the time of the remembrance (in Russian called *pominalnye prazdniki* or *godiny*). In contrast, (2) those who died unnaturally (*ne svoeju smert'ju*) cannot pass to the afterlife, and they fall into the category of the dangerous deceased who are stuck in an eternal limbo of un-death and bother the living at certain periods. They are called either *založnye pokojniki* (from *založit' /zakladyvat'*, “to lay aside, to set aside”), or *mertvjaki* (in opposition to the common term for the deceased, *mertvec*), and they are just a part of the much wider category of other revenants, the so-called “walking dead”, *chodjačie pokojniki* (cf. Tolstaja 2015, 379–444). I am going to refer to this category of revenants, i.e. to *založnye pokojniki*, as the *unclean* or *unquiet dead*, since this is a common term in the English literature on the topic (e.g. Ryan 1999, Warner 2000, Warner 2011).

How does one become an unclean dead? Basically, this category of the deceased is most commonly recruited from: (1) those who had met unnatural, violent, or unexpected deaths (people drowned, lost in the forest, frozen to death, fallen into a swamp, assassinated by someone); (2) those who committed suicide, regardless of the manner of death they chose (*samoubijcy*); (3) those who died during a liminal period of their lives, that is, above all, the unbaptized children (*nekrešćenie deti*), or miscarried foetuses (*poterčata*), and also young people deceased, for example, just before their wedding or initiation; (4) those who were believed or suspected to be witches, sorcerers, and vampires even when they were alive (i.e. socially determined unclean dead; cf. Warner 2000).

The central problem of this category of deceased is their lack of a proper funeral. Because of their unclean status, they were not worthy of a Christian funeral ceremony at the cemetery, because their burial in the consecrated ground might cause drought and famine (cf. Warner 2011). Thus, *založnye pokojniki*, when their body was found, were literally “set aside” and buried (or just thrown carelessly) on demarcated places, such as at crossroads, on the boundary strips between fields, alongside roads, in woods and forests (or on the boundaries of forest and field). Sometimes, they were thrown into swamps or rivers. In other words, they are always buried on places distant, marginal, boundary, or otherwise liminal.

Rusalki are to a great extent the same. In the East Slavic tradition, they are widely believed to belong to the liminal realm of the unclean dead. They meet the criteria of the abovementioned categories (1), (2) and (3), and sometimes even (4) (cf. Zelenin 148–153 *et passim*; Vinogradova 2000, 40–41, 145–148; and especially Vinogradova & Levkievskaja 2012, 475–500). However, their most important distinctive feature is that they are the exemplary *feminine* version of the unclean dead (therefore *založnye pokojnicy*; Zelenin 1995, 141). Although there naturally exists a variety of inconsistencies, even for example on such a relatively small area as Polesia, we can generally conclude that, in the vast majority of the ethnographic data, *rusalki* are recruited mostly from the deceased females, either children or adult.

Thus, most frequently, *rusalki* are *souls of maidens who died an untimely and often unnatural death, or of those who died in the liminal period between betrothal and marriage*. Ultimately, there are some hints that any woman who did not marry, i.e. did not

fulfil her life role, had the potential to become *rusalka* following her death (Moyle 1985, 224). There is no denying that the image of *rusalki* as we know it was fundamentally influenced and widened either by including more categories of revenants into the *rusalka*-pool-category, or by the superimposition of features of other folklore beings, such as noon-rave (*polednica*), wood sprite (*lešij*), water sprite (*vodjanoj*, *vodjanica*), or other Slavic feminine demons not associated with unclean dead per se (that is *vily*, *beregini*, *samodivy*, etc.; see Zelenin 1995, 214–226; Vinogradova 2000, 31–66). Let us emphasize here that these changes are not any kind of “distortions of the original” (whatever “the original” would be). We have to assume that these changes have a reason and they constitute *rusalka* as a whole, as a structurally embedded and practically functional element of the Russian folk culture with all its coherencies and even inconsistencies.

Therefore, even though we can contend with Zelenin’s basic argument that *rusalki* are to some degree a special feminine version of the unclean dead, we need to conclude they are much more than just that. Zelenin himself wrote that the *rusalka* in her complete, let us say syncretic picture, is something special that is very difficult to find among other world traditions (1995, 226). He also had some trouble with the classification of *rusalki*, because unlike any male unquiet dead, they are much more independent, they do not depend on the will of “devil” or “unclean force”, as some revenants do (cf. Keyworth 2010), but they are operating on their own. Similarly, they dwell in water, on the frontier of different worlds (cf. Kriničnaja 2004, 324–326), they sit on lakeshores and riversides, hang around bridges and mill wheels, climb into trees, or run in the fields and meadows. Nonetheless, they are “much more than mere water sprites” (Moyle 1985, 221) and much more than local demons of any of the mentioned places. In the same ways, they can be dangerous for humans, they can cause death or sickness (Vinogradova & Levkievskaja 2012, 550–580), but they are not mere personifications of sicknesses or sexual lust. Finally, during Rusalia (as we will see below), they ritually bring the moist and life-giving power of the water into the fields – but they are something more than just fertility demons.

It is obvious that we cannot understand *rusalki* and their position and function in the East Slavic folklore and practices connected to it unless we fully examine every feature associated with them. Despite the fact that they are dead and stuck in the limbo of eternal un-death, in the vast majority of our sources, *rusalki* are associated not only with deathly, dangerous swamps, rivers and lakes (as we would expect of zombie-like beings like them) but, notably, they are commonly related to the flowering of rye fields and with the fertility of the crops. That is the reason why we now must turn our attention to their sometimes elusive and sometimes quite obvious sexual and erotic features.

SEXUALITY

Studies of Russian and Ukrainian ethnographers usually do not venture too much into research of the theme of *rusalki*’s sexuality and eroticism, unless it is within the collective monographs specialized just on “erotic folklore” as such (thus e.g. Agapkina 1995; Vinogradova 1996). In other cases, the great deal of summary works on *rusalki* simply

mention their erotic features and vaguely sexualized actions, but do not interpret them in any way in the context of their other characteristics (the exception being Propp 1963). For Zelenin, as an example, the fertility features of *rusalki* were only a later sediment on an original cult of the unclean dead (1995, 291). In contrast, if a paper dealing with this aspect of the *rusalki*'s character occurs (Moyle 1985; Rappoport 1999), it is usually very reductive, unfortunately, suppressing every other feature. In this section, I will therefore discuss and evaluate some of the academic theories on *rusalki*'s sexuality. Building on those, I will try to propose a new one.

Let us consider the obvious sexual and erotic traits in *rusalki* beliefs, first. As we have already seen, the *rusalki* can, and usually do, appear as young and beautiful girls, very often naked or just symbolically covered in transparent white gowns. *Rusalki* are very often highly seductive and irresistibly beautiful women (*krasavicy, prekrasnye, nagie, krasivennye dzeŭky, prygožye diučiny*, etc.; cf. Zelenin 1995, 177–182; Vinogradova & Levkievskaja 2012, 501–504, 508–511) with usually large breasts.¹¹

Even though Slavic folklore can be very explicitly and vulgarly sexual if it wants to be (cf. Toporkov [ed.] 1995; Agapkina 2002, 169–202, Gura 2012, 624–634), in that case of *rusalki* many sexual and erotic traits are expressed rather indirectly. The reason that scholars claim that the elaboration of this motif in folklore must have been only a consequence of romantic literary adaptations (e.g. Vinogradova & Levkievskaja 2012, 575) is because the *explicit* data about sexual relations of *rusalki* with humans are quite rare in folklore (thus, Vinogradova 1996, 215, for example, concludes that the sexual actions of *rusalki* in the East Slavic sources are “meagre and not important”). I would like to argue otherwise and use indirect evidence to fully uncover the *rusalki* relations to the concept of eroticism and female fertility in the Slavic folklore. I believe that this specifically indirect and “shy” sexuality of *rusalki* might be a keystone of their complex function in the symbolic system.

First, *rusalki*, as they appear in sources, usually sing, laugh and dance and they try to lure young lads to approach them.¹² It is important to stress here that their victims are most often adult (or adolescent) males, *rusalki* attack children or girls just rarely; they almost never attack adult women.¹³ When the male victim comes closer, *rusalki* playfully tickle him,¹⁴ dance with him, and bathe and joke with him. However, do not be mistaken, the eroticism of *rusalki* is rather “fake and terrifying” (Propp 1963, 132). When they start to tickle, they tickle to death (and if someone would doubt the sexual character of this deathly tickling, there are some records of *rusalki* tickling their victims with their enormous breasts [*grudjami, cyckami*]; Zelenin 1995, 201).¹⁵ When they start to dance, they also dance till the exhaustion and death of their male dancing partner. When they seduce a boy, and take him into a kind of erotic jacuzzi in a river, they drown him

¹¹ A fact which Zelenin in particular found quite fascinating (cf. Zelenin 1995, 160–161, 176–177, 215–217).

¹² Cf. the manifold ethnographic data in Vinogradova & Levkievskaja 2012.

¹³ It should be also noted here that the majority of narrators of our East Slavic sources were males.

¹⁴ The terms are: *sčekotajut, ščekočut, zaščekotajut, zaščekočivajut, (za)loskotajut, (za)loskočujut, kyzikajut*, etc. (cf. Zelenin 1995, 177–201).

¹⁵ For ethnographic data from Polesia see Vinogradova & Levkievskaja 2012, 555–564.

eventually, usually by simultaneously tickling him. Even when the victim manages to escape somehow, he becomes melancholic, mute or withdrawn from reality for the rest of his life (Zelenin 1995, 158–160).¹⁶

“The beauty of *rusalki* is the dead beauty and it emphasizes their lack of maternal features – that is why they are terrible,” concludes Propp (1963, 132). But is it really like that? Are *rusalki* truly just dead, bloodthirsty spinsters who hate humankind and just want to eradicate men by tickling them away? In other words, is their hysterical laughter, tickling, dancing and bathing to death really a “conscious” malevolent act from their side? Or could it be, as Moyle (1985, 225) suggests, rather evidence of their playful, but eventually tragic essence because of which they cause death and bring destruction *only inadvertently*?

Let us consider some data that might support this hypothesis, above all the role of the Russian woman in rural society (cf. Levin 1989). Remember what we already know: *Rusalki* are mostly the undead souls of girls and women deceased in marriageable age (which could have been from thirteen to fourteen years in the Middle Ages up until the 15th century, later a bit older; cf. Worobec 1991, 125; Pushkareva 1992, 108). We cannot, unfortunately, delve into details of how intricate and complexly developed Russian wedding ritual is.¹⁷ For now, let us just settle with the fact that folklore clearly claims that if anything went wrong during any of the delicate and liminal transitions pertaining to the complex wedding ceremony (i.e. betrothal, marriage, incorporation of bride to new household, giving birth to first baby, etc.), it could have had serious consequences, and if the woman died during that period, she would become a *rusalka* and would end up stuck in the permanent limbo (cf. Gura 2012, 758). In summary, *rusalki* are women who did not (or could not, because they died tragically in maidenhood) successfully complete the most important ritual transition in their life and, therefore, they remained somewhere in between and never made it to the other side.

It is no surprise, then, the folklore evidence emphasizes their dangerous side and suggest that every unprepared contact with them leads to a certain death; *rusalki* can bring madness and their kind might spread various diseases, either among humans or among vegetation (Zelenin 1995, 227–228; Vinogradova & Levkieskaja 2012, 576–577). They are feared because of their deathly and unpredictable behaviour. However, folklore also offers numerous instances of *rusalki*'s benevolent powers regarding the fertility of the fields (we will come back to this issue later). This ambivalence is not difficult to comprehend.

When we evaluate the data in the context of the symbolic system as a whole, we can hypothesize *rusalki* need not be seen (and are not seen) as only malicious demonic forces, but they could very well constitute a specific category of tragic beings desperately trying to get what they permanently lost – their unfulfilled social role. I believe that their ambivalent and often destructive behaviour symbolizes in the sources a desire to

¹⁶ Cf. the Greek concept of *nympholēptos*, “maddened by the nymphs”. The same psychological issues apply for men attacked by South Slavic female mythological beings (Vinogradova 1996, 214).

¹⁷ See e.g. Balašov (ed.), 1984; Maslova 1984; Levin 1989, 79–135; Worobec 1991, 118–174; Pushkareva 1992; Toporkov (ed.) 1995, 149–244; Kononenko 2007, 48–54; and most recently and very thoroughly Gura 2012.

act like attractive and desirable potential brides – only *rusalki* do not know how to do this and they are very bad at this. We just need to understand what it means in the whole system of folklore and how the narrators inserted their own values and norms into the ethnographic material we possess.

I believe that once we consider each of their actions first in the context of the wedding ritual symbolism, it becomes much clearer. Let us consider, first, the symbolism of their loose hair. Some ethnographic context is necessary here: In the East Slavic culture, the unwedded maiden's hair had to be braided in only one simple braid (sometimes supplemented by ribbons, flowers or beads), while the characteristic of a married woman were two braids, coiled around the head and hidden under an elaborate headdress. The transition between these two hairstyles, these symbols of position in a social system, needed to be enacted ritually during the wedding ceremony in order to symbolically portray the changes in the social and sexual status (cf. Leach 1958). The transition usually started during the *devičnik*, the East Slavic bachelorette party taking place on the wedding eve, when the bride was – among other things – subjected to protracted ritual ablution, her hair was washed and combed repeatedly, and her maiden braid was ritually braided for the last time to the accompaniment of ritual lamentations by the bride herself, ritually weeping for her soon-to-be-lost maidenhood, her “will” (*volja*) and “beauty” (*krasota*; cf. Pushkareva 1992, 110–112; Tolstaja 1996; Gura 2012, 604–617). Even during the wedding ceremony, the bride's hair was handled and controlled many times (see Gura 2012, 446–450). On the day of the wedding, her hair was unbraided and covered by a kerchief by her father or by the groom as a symbolic separation from her family household. Then the ceremony proceeded to the church. This was the only time the hair of a woman was allowed to be worn loose (cf. Maslova 1984, 47–62; Gura 2012, 455–459), though under a kerchief. In the church, and only in the church, the family kerchief or maiden wreath could be replaced by the bridal veil (Gura 2012, 705–707). Then the bride was taken to the groom's household. There she was ritually incorporated into the new family by having her loose hair braided again – now into two marital braids that were consequently concealed under her bridal veil, a symbol of wedlock.¹⁸

It is clear that the ritual treatment of hair during the East Slavic wedding ceremony symbolizes, among other things, submission of a woman to her husband (Levin 1989, 38), that is, unfortunately, what the wedding ceremonies in patriarchal and patrifocal societies are usually about. Nevertheless, the very interesting “unbraided” phase of the ceremony for sure does not represent any sign of “pre-monogamous society” or freer female sexuality in the days of matriarchal pagan yore (as Rappaport 1999, 58–60, claims).¹⁹ It is simply a ritual enactment of the liminal and dangerous transitional phase

¹⁸ The only other time – other than her wedding – when a woman was allowed to appear in public with her hair unbraided was during her mourning by a graveside, which is also a very liminal ritual position (cf. Warner 2011, 162–163).

¹⁹ Her claim is more of a wishful thinking than a serious argumentation, in particular because it is based strictly on Gimbutasian theories of prehistoric matriarchy and on a rather esoteric, New-Age-like discourse employed in this context for the first time by Joanna Hubbs (1988). See, e.g., the critical reviews of Hubbs' infamous book by Eve Levin (1990) and by Natalie K. Moyle (1989, with respect to the *rusalki* problem).

(cf. Gura 2012, 708) during which a maiden *does not belong to anyone and anywhere in the social system*, she is literally “no man’s woman”. This applies to *rusalki* as well: Their hair was *permanently* loose (this parallel of *rusalka* and bride was noticed already by Zelenin 1995, 184–185). It is one of the most significant features of their physiognomy: *Rusalki* have long, beautiful and unbraided hair and they love to comb and moisten it. *Rusalki* are by definition no man’s women in this perspective, they are stuck between the maiden-phase and bride-phase for ever, and so they dwell in a liminal limbo with their hair loosed for ever. The constant washing, moistening, and combing of their hair might thus be a symbolic representation of the endless wedding preparation that will never occur.²⁰

The other example of this wedding symbolism is that *rusalki* sometimes try to weave. This can also be interpreted as a desire to perform an action that is very common for young girls before marriage (cf. Worobec 1991, 122–124) and in a prism of Zelenin’s “evil *rusalki* theory” it can be seen as a mere camouflage to look like desirable brides. Analogically, they can bother human girls by trying to steal their clothes, garments, embroidery or beads and in a few recorded ritual songs they even explicitly beg girls to give them their clothes (see Miklosich 1864, 8–9; Zelenin 1995, 185–186), probably, again, in order to be more attractive as potential brides. And yet, when *rusalki* weave, they do it backwards, they un-weave the fibres and spoil them.²¹ Moyle asserts (1985, 226) that *rusalki*’s inability to weave as well as their vain effort to look like desirable brides just proves the fact that they are completely unsuitable as brides for humans, which is partially right. Yet there is more to it than this, and again, it turns our attention to the fact that *rusalki* desperately try to do things that are normal for the girls of their age, but they *do not know how*. There is also evidence that apart from the garments, *rusalki* steal human children and try to breast-feed them (Vinogradova & Levkievskaja 2012, 470). This also can be understood as a narrative representation of the desperate desire to fulfil the role that was denied to them in a real life (it is important, however, that this abduction usually results in death of the baby and its new “existence” in the form of an unbaptized baby-*rusalka*, *rusalenja*).

Analogically, among *rusalki*’s many playful activities are the stealing of horses and taking them for joy-rides, which always result in overriding and killing the poor animal (Agapkina 2002, 358). For Moyle (1985, 227), this is an expression of *rusalki*’s “unbridled sexuality”, since the horse-ride is among the many standard rites of the ritual pre-wedding entertainment, *devičnik* (cf. Pushkareva 1992, 110). By analogy we can return to the tickling-problem: here again it is possible that *rusalki* are simply doing what they deem natural and desirable, but as they do not know how to do it properly, it ends tragically. Their tickling of the male victim to death is, in my opinion, their only way of expressing the sexuality as they are supposed know it. Theirs is the childish, unripen sexuality of

²⁰ Moreover, the word “combing” is in East Slavic folklore a common euphemism for sexual coitus (Rus. *česat*, Ukr. *čysat*, *počysat*, cf. Gura 2012, 631), the semantics we need to bear in mind. For another interesting, but very Eliadean interpretation of the hair combing motif in the context of the North Russian water folklore cosmologies, see Kriničnaja 2014, 71–86.

²¹ In Vinogradova & Levkievskaja (2012, 567) there is only a reference to the upcoming, but still unpublished volumes of the Polesian archive data on how *rusalki* come at night to houses, weave and spoil the fibres.

young girls who do not know how to express it properly yet – or better: they *are socially supposed not to know*, because the society needs them to be “honourable” and “chaste” before wedding (Levin 1989, 59–69; Worobec 1991, 147–148; Tolstaja 1996; Gura 2012, 618–624), even though this ideal, of course, often contradicts the everyday experience. Therefore, they are supposed to know only playful tickling, whimsical bathing and jolly dancing. When all this takes an unbearable amount of time and when it is performed by numerous *rusalki* outnumbering the poor lad, it can end only as unendurable endless foreplay that eventually kills the human lover.

Thus, Propp was most likely right that their sexuality is fake and not functional (1963, 133) and tickling of their male victims is kind of inverted, improper sex act (*ibid.*, 77–81). Despite that, I am not so convinced about his assertions that all this stems solely from their deadly character which only disguises them as a living and procreative in order to actually destroy life and procreation. I am also not so sure about Moyle’s claims about unbridled sexuality and unrestrained eroticism because it seems to me that *rusalki*’s sexuality is by definition *precisely the opposite*: bridled and restrained, since they are stuck in limbo of eternal pre-marital foreplay that, in their case, cannot possibly result in any conception.²²

This sexual symbolism combined with death or funeral symbolism is difficult to grasp. The anthropologists Huntington and Metcalf (1979, 98–118) assumed, in a proper Frazerian manner and similarly to Moyle, that sexuality that is enacted during the mortuary rituals (of the Bara of southern Madagascar, in their case) must surely be a symbolic representation of the regeneration of life. Bloch and Parry (1982, 19), on the contrary, suggested that sexuality elaborated in these rites (i.e. in the imminent context of death) actually *dissociates* sexuality from fertility and construct sexuality as something *antithetical to fertility*. Thus, the untamed female sexuality can be, in their opinion, structurally identified with the dangerous, socially-unproductive wild (cf. MacCormack 1980: 10–11) and everything wild, non-cultural and “raw” would be thus identified with women’s sexuality, with biological birth or with death, and seen as intrusions of the wild into the “cooked” and “tamed” world of men.

This would, however, be very misleading in our case, since it oversimplifies a much more complicated symbolic complex. *Rusalki* do not actually represent the pole of the wild, untamed, infertile sexuality. They represent rather *unripen and unaccustomed sexuality*, stranded in never ending puberty. We have seen that they constantly and desperately try to cross the line and to become precisely the opposite, but they cannot ever succeed in this – metaphorically speaking, they are stuck right in the middle of the abovementioned series of oppositions, in between them, forever on the border. They are neither sexual in a wild, unrestrained sense, nor fertile and procreative in a proper, cultural, social manner. They are neither married, nor unmarried, equally as they are neither dead, nor alive.

And yet, despite all this ambiguity, *rusalki* are widely considered to be bearers of crop fertility and protectors of the crops in the most fragile period of growth – during

²² If it did result in conception in real life, it ended with the poor girl becoming a *rusalka* and thus returning to the state of unripened sexuality. Thus, the sexuality of *rusalki* does not “go beyond the sexuality of the wedding rite”, as Moyle says (1985, 235) – it forcibly stays *just before* the limen of wedding.

the flowering stage of rye which is the only time they are allowed to appear on this earth. The question how this is possible eventually brings us to the last issue that needs to be discussed here – the issue of calendar time and its relation to the rusalkian complex.

CALENDAR TIME

The most important feature of *rusalki* which has yet not been analysed is the fact they are allowed to appear on earth and walk freely *only in a certain, specifically demarcated period of time*. This is usually two weeks around Christian Pentecost, Whitsunday, which is in the East Slavic Orthodox terminology called *Pjatidesatnica* (Pentecost), but in folklore it is more commonly called *Troica* (Trinity), *Den' Svjatoj Troicy* (Holy Trinity Day),²³ or *Zelenye svjatki* (Green Holiday). This period around Whitsunday is usually called Rusalía Week (*Rusal'naja nedelja/tyžden*). There are, however, two folklore traditions, one claiming that this Rusalía Week denoted the *week before* Whitsunday/Trinity Sunday, the other the *week after* it.²⁴

In the first possibility, *rusalki* were “released” into the world of the living on the Thursday of Pre-Trinity Week which is called *semik* or *semickaja nedelja*, since it is the seventh week after Easter (*sem*’, ‘seven’), and sometimes this Thursday, as such, is called *semik* or *semucha* (Atrošenko *et al.* 2015, 394). Other terms for the day of *semik* are *Rusal'čin Velikden'* (Rusalka's Holiday), or *Troica umeršich* (Trinity of the Dead); it was the holiday of commemoration of the unclean dead, while the regular ancestors had their most important holiday on Trinity Saturday (*Troickaja subbota/roditel'skaja subbota*), the day before Whitsunday itself (Loginov 2010, 389; Warner 2011, 164).

In the second possibility, which was much more common and in which *rusalía* labelled the week *after* Trinity Sunday, *rusalki* “had the right” (Vinogradova & Levkievskaja 2012, 521) to appear during this period (*Troeckij tyžden'*, *Rusal'naja nedelja*, *Grjanaja/Igranaja nedelja*, *Svjataja nedelja*), but with the beginning on Trinity Sunday as such, or on the first Monday after it, which was also called *Rusalkin* or *Rusaločnyj den'* (Atrošenko *et al.* 2015, 368). Their time was then ended either on the first Thursday after Trinity Sunday (this Thursday was again called *Rusalkin den'*, *Rusal'čin Velikden'/Rusalčyn Velikdén'*, *Rusalkina Pascha*, *Naškaja Troica*, *Grenoj četver*), or on the first Monday of St. Peter's Fast (*Petrov[skij] post*, or *Apostol'skij post*, Apostles' Fast) – that is on the first Monday after Trinity Week was over. This day was also called *Rozyhry/Rozigri* (Games of Roses), *Rusal'nyj ponedelok* (Rusalía Monday), *Rusalka*, *Rusali*, or *Rusal'skie zagoven'ja/Rusal'noe zagoven'e* (Driving out *rusalki*). On this terminal date

²³ That is because in Orthodox liturgical year, Pentecost (Whitsunday) and Trinity are both celebrated on the same Sunday (on the 50th day after Easter), while in the Western Christian Catholic liturgical calendar the Trinity is celebrated the week after the Pentecost, i.e. on the 57th day after Easter.

²⁴ Cf. thoroughly Maksimov 1994, 379–384; Zelenin 1995, 237–249; Propp 1953, 58–78; Sokolova 1979, 185–213; Bondarenko 1995, 168–172; Agapkina 2002, 342–350; Rouhier-Willoughby 2011; Vinogradova & Levkievskaja 2012, 470, 521–525; lexicographically Tolstaja 2005, 214–218; and Atrošenko *et al.* 2015, 367–369. For South Slavic parallel of *rusalje* see Vinogradova 1992.

of *rusalkis*' appearance on earth, an important "farewell ritual" – *provody rusalok* – was celebrated; we shall return to it soon.

We have already seen that the connection of the term *rusalia* or *rusalii* with Pentecost has been known since the late Middle Ages, and we have also seen that Miklosich conclusively proved this term's origins in the Western *rosalia/rusalia*. Thus, *rusalia* was identified with "festivity after Easter" in Balsamon's commentary on the 62nd canon of the sixth church council from the 12th century (ῥουσάλια, τὰ μετὰ τὸ ἅγιον πάσχα; Miklosich 1864, 3), or in a homily by the Bulgarian archbishop Demetrios Khomatianos from the 13th century (*ibid.*).²⁵ It is therefore clear that the name of *rusalki* is secondarily derived from the name of the festivity. It however does not mean that they themselves are only a secondary elaboration of folklore that was just added to spring, Pentecostal period "later" because it was "popular", as for example Agapkina (2002, 349) wants to claim. Their functions, actions and their manifold characteristics we have analysed above make very coherent sense not only in the context of wedding ritual, but also in the ritual complex of the spring period, as I would like to assert here.

First, the above-mentioned local variations, whether Rusalía Week is the one before or the one after the Trinity Sunday, are probably one of the many consequences of fusion and overlapping of the pre-Christian calendar and the later Christian liturgical year that was superimposed on the former structure of pagan festivities about which we know close to nothing. While the period of *rusalkis*' appearance was usually defined by means of more or less folklorized Orthodox liturgical terms (and we saw clearly there was no unity of these folk terms among the Eastern Slavs, except for the common lexical element of *rusal-*),²⁶ there was yet another option to demarcate *rusalki*'s time on earth: They appeared on earth *when the crops and grasses were flowering* (Zelenin 1995, 250; Vinogradova & Levkievskaja 2012, 525–529), and never at any other time (e.g. *u drugoe vrémja jich ne bulo*, *ibid.*, 524).

There are two contradictory sets of beliefs about their actions in that period which is probably the consequence of their pervasive ambivalence seen above: Either they can destroy the crops by stamping on and dancing in it (*ibid.*, 565–566), or, in contrast, they were the ones who by their dancing on the top of it made the crops grow, or who made the circles of grass greener (Maksimov 1994, 88), who brought fertility and moist into the fields (Vinogradova & Levkievskaja 2012, 471, 538–541), and who sometimes helped people with agriculture (*ibid.*, 598–599; Vlasova 2015, 211–222). In this context, it is interesting to invoke the image of *rusalki*, combing their long and damp green hair, which could be seen also as a metaphorical image of the long green "hair" of the flowering crops (cf. Kriničnaja 2014, 76).

During the Rusalía Week, there were also numerous ritual interdictions closely associated with the flowering of crops. It was forbidden to run around in the fields because *rusalki* were there, and they could catch anyone and dance him to death. It was also absolutely forbidden to work during the Rusalía Week: not only agrarian work were

²⁵ See also (among others) *Slovo svjatogo Nifonta o rusalijachъ* (in: Gal'kovskij 2013, 524–534), cf. Rybakov 2015 [1987¹], 695–753.

²⁶ Cf. the useful lexeme map in Agapkina 2002, 344.

prohibited, but every woman's handwork, especially weaving; otherwise an illness or bad luck would afflict the transgressor (Agapkina 2002, 365–367). Yet similarly, it was forbidden to bathe in natural waters during that time, or to do laundry or wash children in rivers for that matter, and for quite obvious reasons – *rusalki* might attack and drown anybody who would dare come close to the water (Vinogradova & Levkievskaja 2012, 660–670; on ritual prohibitions in general see Kriničnaja 2014, 107–109, 128–129).

In contrast, there were various offerings made for *rusalki* during Rusalia Week, presumably in order to pacify or keep them away (Zelenin 1995, 234–237): Bread, pancakes, milk or honey were usually offered to them at field borders, at the crossroads, along the forest roads or on distant burial mounds of the particular unclean dead. Very common were also offerings of white clothes and wreaths of flowers which make sense in the context of what we already know about *rusalki*'s desire for these wedding-related objects. In this sense, we must understand also the probably apotropaic custom of weaving wreaths and hanging them all around village houses and on trees in the forest during *semik* (*ibid.*, 275; cf. Propp 1963, 58–61), or to throw them in a river (a type of *do ut abeas* sacrifice).

In the period in which they occur on earth they shall be venerated and feared in order to act benevolently, but when their time is fulfilled, they must be ritually dismissed, otherwise they would stop everything that they so delicately helped to grow and bloom from ripening. Just as their endless play with human lovers caused the death of humans, their endless presence in the crops would also cause only its destruction. The parting ritual was usually called *provody rusalok*, “procession of *rusalki*” (lit. ‘seeing off *rusalki*’) and it took place either on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday (i.e. on *Rusalkin den*’, etc.; see above) or just a few days later, on the beginning of St. Peter's Fast (in this case it was called *Rozyhry/Rozigri*).²⁷

The structure of this festival is simple. One *rusalka*, as a *pars pro toto* symbol for all *rusalki*, is carried away from the village in a procession and then ritually disposed of, “seen off”. This exemplary *rusalka* can be performed either by an elected girl dressed or naked like a *rusalka* (usually the tallest and strongest of the girls of marriageable age),²⁸ or by a ritual effigy (*čučelo*) made from straw or wood.²⁹ In both cases, the procession consists of girls, dressed like *rusalki*, with wreaths on their heads. They constitute a community of “*rusalki*” and they are seeing off the exemplary *rusalka* while dancing around and singing ritual songs, offering clothes to her or asking her mockingly to tickle them (Šejn 1898, 366–367). When the *rusalka* was performed by a girl, the procession ended in the fields among the crops while playing ritual games (the blindfolded *rusalka* hunted and tickled her victims), and then it was concluded by a mock funeral made for her. In the case of seeing off a ritual effigy of *rusalka*, the figurine was either torn apart and then buried, or torn apart and tossed into the river or all over the field. At the end of the festival, the boys came to join the procession, the girls throw them their wreaths and either run away, or the groups were ritually merged together.

²⁷ For a thorough description see Šejn 1898; Zelenin 1995, 251–291; Propp 1963, 79–82; Sokolova 1979, 213–223; Vinogradova 1986, 108–121; Warner 2011, 162–164; Vinogradova & Levkievskaja 2012, 470, 687–698.

²⁸ Performed *rusalka*: Šejn 1898, 360n; Maksimov 1994, 380–381; Zelenin 1995, 253–255; Propp 1963, 58–81.

²⁹ Figurine *rusalka*: Šejn 1898, 367; Zelenin 1995, 255–257;

The overall structure of *provody rusalok* is analogous to various Slavic folk rituals in which an effigy personifying a certain festival or season is seen off in a procession and ritually disposed of. A similar structure can be found, for example, in the East Slavic festival *provody maslenicy*, “seeing off *maslenica*”, in which an effigy of *maslenica* (Lent, or Shrovetide), is carried out of the village and then buried in a ritual mock funeral (cf. Propp 1963, 70–74 with a survey of Frazerian interpretations; see also Klejn 2004, 281–323; Veleckaja 2009, 233–254). *Provody maslenicy* took place usually sometime in March and were parallel to the West Slavic custom of carrying out the Morana/Death.³⁰ A very close parallel to seeing off the effigy of *rusalka* is the *troickaja* or *semickaja berezka*, Trinity or *Semik* Birch (Agapkina 2002, 410–412). In this ritual girls and boys from the village chopped down a young birch tree and then carried it from the woods into the fields and tossed it there – allegedly, as we know from the rare emic interpretation of such ritual, they did so to ensure a sufficient amount of rain for the upcoming summer (Propp 1963, 77, citing Zernova 1932, 30). Basically, every season of the year could have its special *provody* ritual that ended it (Tolstaja 2005, 15). We can find the most striking similarities with the mock funeral of *rusalka* in the Kupalo festivities which took place on the summer solstice, that is on the Eve of John the Baptist, *Ivan Kupalo* (23rd–24th June), and in which a male ithyphallic effigy, called *Kupalo*, *Jarilo*, *Kostroma*, etc., was buried and sometimes resurrected again.³¹ Kupalo festivities took place near water and were replete with erotic symbolism, bathing, fire jumping, and dancing on the ritual fields called *igrišta* – church literature reprehended the orgiastic nature of this ritual. Moreover, sometimes, since Pentecost is a moveable holiday dependent on the date of Easter, the *provody rusalok* might occasionally coincide with Kupalo.³²

We have seen that the mock funeral took a prominent position in both cases of the possible ritual enactment of *provody rusalok*. It seems obvious that the chosen *rusalka* received a funeral that she had lacked in the past. Thus, she received an exemplary funeral for all *rusalki* and so their period of appearance on this world could be ritually ended. *Rusalka* was seen off, buried and ritually lamented – everything that she did not get, when she “originally” died. Nevertheless, one more aspect that we should be aware of is present in this funerary ritual – wedding symbolism.

Strictly speaking, every East Slavic female funeral was to a certain extent symbolically identified with the wedding (for the following cf. Moyle 1985, 229–231; Bajburin & Levinton 1990; Veleckaja 2009, 255–267; Gura 2012, 86–104, 757–760). Since women were considered to ritually die during the wedding, Russian folk wedding ritual had extensive

³⁰ As known from Bohemia from the Statutes of the Prague Synod (*Concilia Pragensia*) from the years 1366 and 1384 (*ymagines in figura mortis per civitatem [...] deferunt [...] submergunt*; in: Höfler 1862, 10–12) and from later folklore. There was perhaps a much older inspiration source for this ritual structure since the same ritual sequence was applied for the disposal of the old pagan deities, as in the records of the Old Russian *Pověst' vremennychъ lětъ* (in: Téra 2014) on destruction of Perun's cult in Kyiv and Novgorod, and from the Polish chronicler Jan Długosz from his *Annales seu cronicae incliti Regni Poloniae* (in: Dąbrowski 1964, 177–178). For the analysis of structural parallels, see Téra 2009, 138–144.

³¹ Cf. Vinogradova & Tolstaja 1990; Agapkina 1995; Valencova 1999; Agapkina 2002, 513–539; Klejn 2004.

³² As happened in 2016, for example, when *Rusal'čin Velikden'*, the eighth Thursday after Easter, coincided with the Thursday the 23rd June, the Eve of John the Baptist, i.e. *Kupalo*.

funerary symbolism. The bride was considered to be set aside from society and she ceased to be a functioning member of her home household. The pre-wedding preparation rituals were also strongly focused on the ritual washing and dressing the bride which was parallel to the washing of the corpse of the deceased. And both – the deceased and the bride – were wept for in a series of ritual lamentation songs. There is also interesting evidence of the practice that a funeral of an unmarried woman was celebrated in the same manner as wedding, and therefore wedding laments were sung along with the funeral ones (Moyle 1985, 230). In like manner, we can assume that a tragically deceased and unmarried *rusalka* could get what she missed – in the *provody rusalok*, she symbolically got “two in one”.

We can conclude that *provody rusalok* (optionally followed by maidens’ initiation rites called *kumlenie*³³) ended the so-called *semicko-rusal’skij period*. With the ritual burial/wedding of *rusalki*, the spring ends and the summer begins. Let us now proceed to the final part of this paper and see what Rusalija meant in the context of festival succession of the whole year and what it says about time and death reckoning in Slavic folklore.

CONCLUSION: DEATH, TIME, FERTILITY AND CONCEPTS OF REVENANTISM AND RESURRECTION

“The Slavic calendar of annual rites was [...] imbued with ritual contacts with the dead, waiting for their arrival, presence, and supporting them in various established ways,” notes Wojciechowska (2015, 34). Above all in spring, when plants were coming back to life, it was a good opportunity for the ancestors to awake and come back to life, mostly during the festivities at the end of winter as such, which often coincided with the Christian holiday of Easter.³⁴ The unclean dead, on the other hand, used to come back specifically on Pentecost, the period of flowering and the spring-summer changeover (Vinogradova 2000, 206; Klejn 2004, 265; Warner 2011, 158–164). Why is that?

In social anthropology, it is well known that collective calendar festivals are not just passive reflections of time, but they actually *create* time as a phenomenon (Gell 1992). As Edmund Leach wrote, “we create time by creating intervals in social life” (Leach 1955 [2000], 184). The ordering of social time is thus formed mainly by the invented succession of the series of public and private festivals, by distributing guide-marks in the “incommensurable islands of duration” (Bourdieu 1977, 105). This attitude is generally based on the classic Durkheimian notion of time in which each festival represents a temporary intrusion of the sacred into the profane, a shift from normality to something else. Building on this, Leach presented his “pendulum-type concept” of time in which every sequence of events was discontinuous but repetitive, like the movement of a pendulum. As Leach (1955, 182) summarizes: “Time is a succession of alternations and full stops”,

³³ On *kumlenie*, see Maksimov 1903, 427–429; Zelenin 1995, 278–281; Zernova 1932, 29; Propp 1963, 128–131; Zemcovskij 1970, 385–395. Any wider description of this rite is beyond the scope of this paper.

³⁴ Ancestors were venerated during the winter solstice, too, and cult of the dead was very elaborated also during the pre-Shrovetide carnivals, during the early-spring seeing-off Death/Morana/Maslenica, also during Easter holidays (cf. Vinogradova & Levkieskaja 2012, 90–224; Wojciechowska 2015).

of repeated opposites such as day-night, wet-dry, cold-hot, etc. Time is a “discontinuity of repeated contrasts” distributed along a continuous line of duration (*ibid.*, 184; for pendulum cf. also Leach 1953; similarly, also Bourdieu 1977, 105–109).

In Leach’s point of view, we must always consider the system of festivals as a whole. In the East Slavic ritual calendar, we have a great opportunity to see some obvious structural balances in the chronological succession of ritual customs – for example, the pendulum-like changing of oppositions between obligatory ritual ablution (Easter), banned bathing (Rusalia) and then ritual ablution again (Kupalo). On a larger scale, however, the structure of the first half of Slavic ritual year is embedded in between two solar equinoxes, the two ultimate positions of the pendulum: the winter solstice, represented by the holiday of Koljada (OCS *koležda*) or Nativity (*Roždestvo*), and the summer one, represented by Kupalo/Jarilo/Kostroma festivities. Somewhere in the middle of this cycle is the Easter, defined by lunar calendar and thus moveable. Easter as such is surrounded by the two 40-day periods on both sides: Before, the forty days of Lent (*Velikij post*) come, the period of contemplation and waiting for the resurrection. After it, the forty days from the Easter Sunday (*Pascha*) to the Ascension (*Voznesenie*; sixth Thursday after Easter), the period celebrating the triumph of Christ’s resurrection. And then, ten days after Ascension, Pentecost is held, on the fiftieth day after Easter, and along with it the Rusalia festivities, the preparation period just before the summer solstice, Kupalo, the final and ultimate point of the pendulum’s swing (see the table below). The period of Rusalia thus represents one of the most fragile periods of the year, in which it needs to be decided whether the pendulum will make it “there and back again”, in other words, whether the crops will successfully ripen and whether they will be allowed to continue to its mature period in the summer, to the period of St. Peter’s Fast, and eventually culminate in harvesting and thanksgiving festivals in early autumn.

Succession of East Slavic Ritual Festivities in First Half of the Year:

Koljada = winter solstice

Maslenica (Shrovetide)

40 days of *Lent*

Easter (movable, thus determining the surrounding festivities)

40 days between *Easter* and *Ascension* + 10 days to *Trinity Sunday*

Trinity Sunday ≈ **Rusalia Week** (before or after the Trinity Sunday)

Kupalo = summer solstice

And yet, in Slavic folklore, precisely in this period of fragile waiting and anticipation, the unfertile and unripen revenant souls of unmarried maidens start to appear in the world. And just after this period, the sexualized masculine figurine of Kupalo (or his epigones) is buried – but only to be “resurrected” again. Before we interpret these seeming contradictions, we need to address one final problem which is connected with the time reckoning and time creating activities in the context of Slavic folklore: The already mentioned fact the vernacular Slavic calendar succession of festivals, closely tied to the agrarian year, farming and animal husbandry (cf. Tolstaja 2005, 9), was heavily altered

and perhaps even distorted by the superimposition of the Christian liturgical year and its holidays that were mapped on it. The discrepancies of solar and lunar character of the two systems thus caused several inaccuracies and even contradictions.

This problem can be, in my opinion, very nicely apprehended by using Edward Evans-Pritchard's distinction of two categories of time, which he described among the African Nuer (1940, 107–108; cf. also Gell 1992, 15–19). Evans-Pritchard distinguished in the Nuer time reckoning between *ecological time* and *structural time*. Ecological time, in his opinion, consisted of time concepts derived from the natural environment (ecological niche) and from the adaptations the Nuer made to it; it was geared to practical and productive tasks and maintained by socially coordinated collective actions. The structural time was, in contrast, geared to the organizational, institutional and ideological norms, on the models of social structure (relationships, genealogical charters, or political relations). The opposition of ecological and structural time can also be, in a simplified way, viewed as an opposition of nature and culture, or cosmos and meta-cosmos:

ecological time	×	structural time
natural time	×	cultural time
cosmic time	×	meta-cosmic time

No matter how “natural” or “original” the ecological notion of time would be, it is, according to Evans-Pritchard, always constrained by and encompassed in the framework of the superimposed structural time and its socially negotiated forms. We can see something similar in the distinction of the Christian liturgical cycle (structural time), which was superimposed on a pre-Christian, agrarian and vegetative reckoning of time (ecological time), and which tried to constrain the latter and therefore occasionally disrupted it because they were not fully compatible. The different points of view of the structural and ecological time respectively can thus explain, for example, the contradiction in which the time *rusalki* are allowed to walk freely in this world is defined either by Christian Pentecost, or rather by the vegetative facts of flowering of crops.

Thus, bearing in mind everything that we have learned about *rusalki* and Rusalia, we can supplement the list of oppositions we are dealing with here:

ecological time	×	structural time
folklore/“pagan” cycle	×	“Christian” cycle
agrarian	×	liturgical
Rusalia	×	Pentecost
sexual	×	spiritual
fertilizing	×	baptizing
family	×	community
new life of birth	×	new life of conversion
ancestral continuity	×	resurrection
	⇓	
periodical revenantism		

This set of oppositions certainly needs some further clarification. It seems to me that the most important symbolic contradiction at the core of the system of Slavic spring festivities is the fact that death and birth need to be situationally conceptualized as the same thing. In any symbolic system, death has to be necessarily transformed into vitality and regeneration. This usually happens by means of controlling death, giving recognition to it, and treating it ritually in funerary ceremonies or in calendar festivities. This recognition in Slavic folk culture results in two parallel concepts of “good” death: (1) on the “religious” level it is a death of a decent Christian who dies baptized and can await the resurrection; (2) on the “folklore” level it is a death of an elder family member who in the afterlife becomes the ancestor and is venerated as such, embodying the family ancestral continuity. Ancestors are the patrons of revival of crops in general – they are celebrated during the early spring, during sowing, as we have seen. But the period of crops *ripening* requires different patrons. Someone who would embody the fragile, transitional, vital and somewhat sexual nature of the process itself.

Those are the *rusalki*. By their means, the system tries to resolve the unbearable contradiction between death and life: by mapping the Christian Pentecost mysteries and its utmost spiritual appeal (structural time) on the Rusalia, on a climax of the spring period, when the crops are flowering and deadly *rusalki* are present (ecological time). As Bloch and Parry argue (1982, 18), the concept of the “good” and regenerative death can only be constructed and conceived in an *antithesis to an image of the “bad” death*. That means, in our case, that the “mainstream” ideology of Christian resurrection must, therefore, feed itself on the elaboration of all sorts of *subsidiary beliefs and cosmologies of revenantism and ancestors beliefs* so it can argue with them and define itself in contrast with them. Thus, the *rusalki* belief in periodical revenantism to a certain extent mirrors the Christian belief in a bodily resurrection, which was celebrated in the mysteries of Easter and confirmed and completed by the Descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles during Pentecost, which guaranteed eternal life (cf. *Acts* 2:1–31). Analogically, *rusalki* emerge when the crops had already gone through a period of sowing and growing – its own “resurrection” – and when it finally reaches its climax in the flowering which confirms its vital existence and guarantees a good harvest.

In other words, “ideology cannot eliminate the natural world of biological processes or the social world of exchange” (Bloch and Parry 1982, 38), just as the structural time cannot completely overcome and substitute the ecological one. Similarly, Christian resurrection itself cannot fully replace the notion of the annual regeneration of vegetation and crops. The ideology, the structural time, has to be put to work in that very practical world it denies, and it must therefore be compromised with it. Here comes the idea that the ancestors (and unclean dead), who reminds us of our human irreversible ecological mortality, need to be brought back at certain times out of a necessity – and above all to preside over various phases of a growing, flowering, ripening, and harvesting of the fields, whose regenerative rules people do not fully comprehend from the ideological perspective, and which therefore need to be conceptualized practically, ecologically, *and only then* associated with the ideology (cf. *1Cor* 15: 36–38 for the crops regeneration as a metaphor of resurrection).

Therefore, it makes sense that *rusalki*, the undead young maidens, are the patrons of the most delicate period of this process, the time of flowering of crops. The ambivalent and fragile ecological process needs to be guaranteed by equally ambivalent and fragile symbolic representations. *Rusalki* are simply *the personification of the eternal unripen-ness*. They are a mediatory link between the ancestral continuity and the idea of eternal life in resurrection. They are the bearers of potent, but not-yet-managed fertility which needs to be conjured and temporarily revived (but not fully resurrected!) in order to help with the progress of liminal and vital phase of growing the crops (and with the maidens' initiation rites, too). And yet, paradoxically, their strange, unexpected and unmanageable power can dramatically endanger the same procreative forces it enables. *Rusalki* are as deadly as mere water itself, potentially beneficial, but only when used with moderation and on time – otherwise it kills, drowns, and makes things rot.

Their unripe yet potent – and dangerous yet beneficial – force is *a constitutive exception of the whole system of procreation*. They help to cross the line they themselves cannot. This is why *rusalki* are paradoxically patrons of young maidens on their way to marriage in the ritual of *kumlenie* (similarly as virgin Artemis guided Greek girls through the initiation she herself never acquired). This is also why they can bring fertility to the fields in the most fragile period of their flowering, just a few days before this process is finally confirmed by the orgiastic (and still somehow death-connected) Kupalo rituals. This ambivalent force of *rusalki*,³⁵ however, needs to be consequently, when the time comes, calmed down, “seen off”, carried away and “set aside” for the rest of the agricultural season, so the procreation process can continue safely for the remaining time of the year, during ripening, wilting, harvesting, consumption – and the next new regeneration. Only to be temporarily revived next year in the same period.

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³⁵ Klejn (2004, 267–281) asserted that *rusalki*, as *založnye pokojnicy*, were originally girls sacrificed to the Slavic thunder and rain god Perun and that their patronage over the growing and ripening of crops stemmed directly from this connection. His hypothesis is interesting but it cannot be proven in any manner; the practical contexts of calendar year and death-and-life-connected concepts of Christian festivities help explain the *rusalkian* complex better, in my point of view, than any veiled connections to the pre-Christian mythology.

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RUSALKY: ANTROPOLOGIE ČASU, SMRTI A SEXUALITY VE
SLOVANSKÉM FOLKLORU

JIŘÍ DYNDÁ



Východoslovanské rusalky (*rusalki*) jsou ženské mytologické bytosti, jež jsou nejčastěji asociovány s vodou, smrtí a sexualitou a jež se zjevují ve světě vždy v období jarních slavností spojených s křesťanskými Letnicemi. Jakožto významná symbolická reprezentace slovanské lidové kultury byly východoslovanské rusalky již důkladně etnograficky popsány, klasifikovány a srovnávány s jinოსlovanskými folklorními daty i s mytologiemi dalších eurasijských tradic. Tento článek představuje nové zhodnocení a zároveň zásadní poupravení klasické interpretace těchto bytostí z pera D. K. Zelenina, který je chápal jako revenantické duše žen a dívek zesnulých předčasně, před naplněním své životní role, či tzv. nečistou smrtí (tedy jako tzv. *založnyje pokojniki*). Pomocí důkladného rozboru jejich funkce na příkladech folklorních příběhů o nich a na začlenění těchto informací do širšího přediva sociokulturního prostředí – např. do kontextu svatebních, pohřebních a kalendářních rituálů, či do kontextu představ o revenantech a o konceptu křesťanského vzkříšení – je pak ukázáno, jak rusalky zapadají do celkového symbolického systému východoslovanského folkloru a lidové kultury obecně. Jedním z hlavních cílů článku je přispět k porozumění toho, jak hluboce byly rusalky a příběhy o nich propojeny s významnými milníky pravoslavného liturgického roku, zejména s tzv. rusalným týdnem, který v závislosti na lokální tradici předcházel anebo následoval po svátku Letnic, ve východoslovanské tradici nazývaném *Trojica*. V závěru je poté předložena hypotéza, že tyto femininní revenantky je možno chápat jako symbolickou reprezentaci věčné nezralosti a nenaplněnosti, jež musela být každoročně rituálně znovuoživována a následně i rituálně uklidňována, aby svou ambivalentní symbolickou mocí (odlišnou od symbolické moci běžných zemřelých předků) pomohla kulturnímu systému v kritickém okamžiku překonávání jarního liminálního období zemědělského i liturgického ročního cyklu.

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