

# **The Festival of the Holy Trinity (Troitsa) in Rural Russia: A Case Study in the Topography of Memory**

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It is possible to suppose that within the rubble of post-Soviet ruination and fragmentation lie pockets of continuity; that perhaps even in the face of tumultuous social change there are deeply wrought parts of collective memory that assert and reassert themselves. If this is the case, the rough beasts of social and cultural bricolages can take on familiar faces. This paper explores such a supposition by looking at data that is drawn from one village in the Russian north and, more specifically, a battle for power over a single day in the yearly calendar.

## **I. 'Troitsa on TV'**

In early June of 1995, the celebration of Troitsa was newsworthy in Russia. Along with the regular pastiche of soap operas, game shows, war movies & advertisements, there was an entire news program dedicated to this holiday. It had two parts. First, excerpts from a church service were featured. Standing in one of Moscow's glorious churches, Patriarch Alexei II was seen performing the service and explaining to the congregation some of the meaning of this sublime holiday. Candles were lit. There was solemn religious music. The second part of the news took us to an entirely different space. Here, the traditional "folk" expression of the holiday was featured: there was a display of the brightly woven "traditional" clothes of the Russian peasantry from hundreds of years ago, and the celebrations of the pagan "festival of the birch tree" which was supposed to be linked to Troitsa much as how Easter is linked to Spring Equinox festivals. Indeed, on the news and other programs throughout the day, you could see slightly overaged maidens singing in idyllic nature scenes while men played balalaiki and sang along. The TV had two contrasting focal images: church solemnity (on the one hand) and idyllic nature (on the other) where this bifurcation roughly corresponds to a widely accepted view of Russian religion: that it is marked by "*dvoeverie*" or two-faithedness--a kind of syncretism that allows for a back and forth between sober religiosity and near-precious folk expression.

I spent two Troitsas in the northern Russian village of Anufriev. I can say without hesitation that these television programs would not have prepared me for what I saw on this holiday. Not only was there a noticeable absence of singing maidens, birch twigs and colorful get-ups, almost no one went to church on that day. But the day was certainly celebrated. People came to Anufriev from miles, even hundreds of miles away in order to honor this day. They came in 1995 and 1996 (when I was living there) --as they came all through the Soviet period--to their *rodina* and to their ancient graveyards. They came not to sing any particular song or light any particular candle, but to remember their dead, converse with their dead, drink and dance to them until they could drink and dance no more. This is a real holiday with a real function. The parts of the holiday that are in the news are the parts most irrelevant to this function.

## **II. The Problem of Memory and Calendar**

This is not a paper about how traditions are dying. On the contrary, it is about how the deep part of memory asserts and reasserts itself even in the face of aggressive opposition; how the "powers that be"--whether represented by official religion or the state--do in fact exert their power over memory, but fail to overcome it. Russian peasants have historically found themselves in the midst of struggles for control over collective memory--between the competing hegemonies of the church, the Soviet State, and their own village order. The festival of Troitsa--a holiday that has roots in ancient Slavic religion and one that has survived over the centuries by taking on various forms, including Orthodox and Soviet ones--is a poignant example of the degree to which these powers can battle to reign over memory, but also the degree to which they are ultimately incapable of doing so. The first aspect of this paper will be to briefly map the various expressions of the holiday of Troitsa with reference to the symbolism that defines them. I will not use theological models, but will draw from what villagers have told me about what they in fact do and what they remember doing on Troitsa. The second aspect will be to consider the crucial problem of competing ideologies and hegemonies in rural Russia and how, in effect, the calendar generally (and Troitsa specifically) become a crucial battleground in this fight. There are many ways to go about demonstrating how this battle over memory is fought. I will concentrate quite literally on the grounds of the battle, that is, on the symbolic dynamics of place.

### III. Some background

Troitsa, or The Day of the Holy Trinity, is a holiday that has indeed bounced around among several "owners". It takes its name from the "Trinity" and in Russian Orthodoxy, it is the day that commemorates the very subtle concept of "Sophia."<sup>1</sup> It is no surprise, however, that the holiday has pre-Christian roots, the beginning of June (where it is situated) being such a very good time to worry about how your newly-planted crops will fare in the coming months; whether there will be enough rain or too much, whether the sun will hide itself or burn the soil.

Agricultural technology for individual farmers is largely non-mechanized in Anufriev--particularly with regards to private plots; villagers use horses for plowing, and scythes and sickles for hay and grain harvesting. In such a context, planting and harvesting are marked by arduous labor and guess-work where the stakes are extremely high. Because of the notable lack of change in agricultural methods over the centuries, the tension that permeates the spring--"June tension" as it were--remains nearly as pronounced today as it in the pre-Christian centuries. There are certainly disputes about the deeper meanings of many of the pre-Christian holidays in rural Russia. Without getting into this debate (Propp goes over it in some detail in *Russkie Agrarnye Prazdniki* 1963) we can generalize that pre-Christian Troitsa is tied to spring fertility rites: specifically involving drawing land fertility from the force of the dead ancestors. In its not-too-distant practice, it also has indeed involved certain fussing over the birch tree--on Trinity, girls from the village of Anufriev would take birch branches from the forest and bring them into the village. According to literature on the subject, these branches had some link to the souls of the ancestors. But today, in rural Russia, Troitsa is a *graveyard* holiday, a holiday of the dead and of the newly burgeoning soil. More about this later.

The co-opting of this holiday by the church was no unusual feat. In Russian Orthodoxy, as in Western Christianity, there are several sacred milestones in the calendar that are shared between paganism and Christianity--the Easter egg and the Christmas tree being easily traceable pagan vestiges in the West.

In the lifetime of the villagers of Anufriev, the festival of the Holy Trinity was celebrated in two official ways. I begin with the description of these official observances, starting with the places where these celebrations were housed. It will be clear that the physical placement of the holiday celebration has much to say about deeper calendrical habits.

## IV. Elbowing in. Who are the memory tamers?

### A. Church

In the centuries that crawled towards this one, the Orthodox church exerted all kinds of efforts to rein in the wild pagan traditions of rural Russia--steeped, as they were, in the precariousness of the agricultural cycle. It had trained men as priests (sometimes against their will) and sent them to the far-reaches of the empire; it set up monasteries; it tied itself with the Tsar and the State. Even with these concerted efforts, the church calendar took a good six centuries to establish itself more or less in rural Russia.<sup>2</sup> In that time, it managed to give a new face to many of the pagan holidays: Winter Solstice celebrations became *Rodzhestvo* and *Kreshchenie*; End of Winter Carnival became *Maslinitsa*; Spring Rites became Easter, Troitsa, etc. Orthodoxy, in effect, pulled people out of the fields and forests and homes where these days had been observed before Christianity had established itself, and drew them into the confines of the church, where people were made to stand and listen and to quiet the rhythms of their song and dance.

In the distant memories of childhood, many villagers in Anufrievvo remember their parish church that stood on an island in the middle of lake Borbozomskoe. In the winter they could walk to it over ice; in the summer the boat ride there would take 10 minutes. Baptisms took place in this church, as did regular and holiday services. Most generally, the church, was a place that villagers--over the centuries--had learned to come to in order to turn towards higher powers in the hope of receiving protection or succor. The icons in the churches were particular conduits of grace, not only over the suppliant, but over the church grounds itself. There have been heated arguments about the degree of "depth" of rural Orthodox faith. While some philosophers claimed that all "true" Russian religiosity sprung from the souls of the peasants, others said that their beliefs were superficial at best. Regardless of this problem, it can be reasonably assumed that the church was treated by villagers as a special space--one where invocations could be made, and one that housed particular sorts of otherworldly figures: mediating saints and a heavy handed *khoziain*-God.

The church on lake Borbozomskoe was destroyed in 1934. Some of the people of Anufrievvo witnessed this event--traumatic because it showed the sure and hard hand of the State working its way into even these backwoods. It is commonly understood that the destruction of

churches is an unpardonable crime against sacred space. Even if Orthodoxy had failed to thoroughly insert its theology, it had not failed to invest its space (i.e. church) with otherworldly powers. If the izba traditionally housed (as it still does) a *domovoi* (*khoziain doma*), and the forest housed a *leshii* (*khoziain lesavoi*), the church housed another kind of *khoziain*--one who could rage against you if you crossed Him. Crimes against churches--that is, destroying the church and its icons--would curse not only the perpetrator, but his descendants.<sup>3</sup>

So if villagers only very vaguely remember actual Church ritual, they do remember a place of power that was destroyed. The church, it can be said, is housed in the memory of these villagers as a sort of opaque symbol. It is not filled with theological details, but is invested with otherworldly powers of a certain character. The physical church is gone, but the idea of church space remains. In any case, most villagers in Anufrievno have been to church only once or twice in their adult lives. They don't understand church language and they can't recall the details of church ritual. One young man in Anufrievno told me that he has been hesitating to visit a church for the first time in his life; that to cross the threshold of a church was "a big step."

Anufrievno does have one resident who is a regular churchgoer. Weekly, she climbs onto a bus and rides for an hour and a half to Belozersk to get to the only active church in the region. On Troitsa, she became one of the actors in an emerging argument over which day Troitsa should be properly celebrated. News was wafting into the village that there was some objection to going to the graveyard on the Sunday of Troitsa: that that day should be spent in church, remembering the dead there. On Saturday a visit to the graveyard was acceptable, but on Sunday, the dead should be left to rest ("*pust' pokoiniki otдыхayut*").

It appears that this is a kind of power struggle with the church, and at another level, for power over memory. In spite of the rumors of church dissatisfaction, crowds gathered at the cemetery on Troitsa, along with families and distant relatives from far away towns and cities. No one had to be told what to do there.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, the church was making some move to overcome the dominance of this well-established graveyard practice. Rising in power now, the church is not only striving to reclaim the Russian soul for God, but to re-address other pagan practices (such as the healing/sorcery practice of *koldostvo*). In the region of Belozersk, religious books were on sale with titles like *Do Not Participate in the Affairs of Darkness*,<sup>5</sup> a threatening critique of traditional sorcery. In spite of efforts like these, most villagers today do not go to church on Troitsa. The body can only be in one place at a time and on that June day, most

village bodies make pilgrimages not to the houses of Orthodox authority, but again, to the soil that houses their dead.

## **B. Clubhouse (Dom Kul'tury)**

Troitsa had a Soviet expression as well. Much more recent in the memory of villagers than Troitsa church services (if not more vivid in the recollections of villagers) were the "days of the birch tree", planned by *kul'trabotniki* and overseen by the regional "culture" administration. *Kul'trabotniki* were charged with planning activities in the remote village areas, including celebrations of the new Soviet holidays, dances, plays, "agitation" of Soviet ideals and atheism, and, importantly, keeping watch over the successes and failures of the kolkhoz. In villages, the clubhouse was the locus of all these activities: from light-spirited dances, to admonitions for poor kolkhoz returns. A cheap, easy, symbolically poignant way of making a clubhouse was to simply lop the cupola off the top of a church, take out the icons, give the whole thing a good paint-job, add some posters about the value of labor, and perhaps a *krasnyi ugiolok*--a "holy [red] corner" dedicated to images of Lenin. The church, the reiner-in and power-provider, was transformed into the local house of imported Soviet Culture.

The Soviet "day of the birch tree" was described to me by a woman who had worked as the *kul'trabotnitsa* for over 30 years. The birch tree, she explained, was a symbol of beauty. On the holiday that was once Troitsa, they would bring rows of *beryozi* branches into the clubhouse and girls would dance under them. They would recite poems and sing songs in praise of the birch tree. "Birches are good for the *pochki* (kidneys) and can clean dirty air," she added. There was a program for children on this holiday (with events like flower-naming contests) and in the later part of the evening adults would sing and dance.

Like the church, it was partly the job of the clubhouse to literally bring people in. Rein them in. To have them sit and listen and, once again, subject them to external judgements and authority. Intentional or not, it also served to mix symbolic space. It took activities (like dancing and singing) that had been traditionally performed in the open air (the fields, the forest, the graveyard) and brought them inside--placing them in a sometimes tense, administrative, space, an odd and not altogether comfortable mix. There were practical considerations to bringing these festivals inside: when partying outside, village boys regularly waged a sort of

ritualized intervillage gang-warfare. The clubhouse was one way of keeping this violence under wrap as well. It was relatively sterile.

The celebration of the birch tree was also pretty sterile. It was supposed to be a cheery paean to the Russian folk, and it managed to take some of the right elements (girls, birch trees, songs) but literally decontextualized them. Like the church before it, the Soviet state had rewritten the calendar and placed within it its own holy days: using the calendar as one of its demonstrations of ideological muscle. Interestingly, where the church had turned pagan holidays into religious ones, the Soviets had subsequently taken the religious holidays and made them into pagan "lite." The day of the birch tree could be very cute, with children reciting nature poems, but if, in fact, the pagan part this holiday was about fertility in June--just when the land is starting to feel the warmth of its powers--no play about the medicinal virtues of the birch tree would unleash this primal force. Any symbolic power these elements had seems to have gotten lost in the translation. In the past several years, with no one to plan "the day of the birch tree," the holiday shriveled up along with trips to the church. On the other hand, trips to the graveyard on this day, never stopped.

The celebration in the clubhouse shared with the church celebration this aspect of pulling people into controlled space. The church packed a symbolic wallop that the clubhouse did not seem to inherit, even while often physically standing on the same spot.

## **V. Deep memory: the graveyard**

The family is a deep line, a *rod*, a root, a rod. Ancestors must be taken care of for life to run smoothly. This means "remembering" them on their Saints' name days and on other holidays designated for remembrance, like Troitsa. Indeed, the Orthodox calendar is flooded with days on which the dead should be remembered. Propp points out that the yearly ritual cycle of remembering begins at Christmas, where the family dead are remembered in the home, and culminates at the graveyard festival of Troitsa.

"Remembering" most often involves toasting the deceased and saying a few words to them. It also means, on Troitsa, taking care of the graves of the dead and not letting them get grown over with weeds. There is agreement that the ancestors can help or hinder your life

situation, depending on how well you remember them. According to Orthodoxy, a person's soul should go "up to heaven" forty days after death (thereby exiting this human world and going into the "heavenly kingdom"). The common beliefs include, however, the idea that the dead stay rather close to their *rodina*. They are available for help, when necessary.

On Troitsa, one goes to the cemetery. One brings food and drink and materials to clean up the site of the graves of your relatives. The family that I went with the first year brought a rybnyi *pirog* (fish pie), candies, some vodka, berry juice and a sickle to cut the grass around the grave. Family plots are often fenced off with an iron gate. Inside the gate, there are grave stones, a benches and a makeshift table. Individual families gather at their plots and sit and toast their deceased. They report the goings on during the year, how well they worked, how family members were getting along. This part of the Troitsa ritual establishes bonds with the members of the long, old familial line--usually the paternal line. Such bonds bring force and protection to a given family line. They set things right for the coming agricultural cycle.<sup>6</sup>

If the first order of the day is remembering and caring for one's own dead, the next task is to visit the graves of others and drink to the dead of other families. In this way, you wander from grave to grave, beckoned by families: "Come! remember my husband! Come, remember my son!" Stories are told of life and death: "You never knew my babushka! She was a good woman!" Sometimes you cry at untimely deaths. The oldest people in Anufrievo had lived through revolutions, wars, famines, political upheaval, and the physical and psychic ills that followed in the wake of these events. Here, at the graveyard, the village can mourn its dead--but more than that, it can draw power from the dead. As the day wears on and the graveyard rocks with drunkenness, some threshold is crossed. People go home and continue their drinking and some begin to sing and dance. What had been wailing becomes another *cri de coeur*.

Near the end of the day in the graveyard, *pshionaia kasha* (or rice or some other grain) is scattered over the graves as it is thrown before a casket in a funeral procession. Some villagers say that this is "just a tradition" and others say that it is so the birds who eat the grain would also remember the dead. By the logic of Propp, this is a reinforcement of the hope that life-force will be taken from the dead ancestors and placed into the earth where it can bring about life and sustenance.

As it is faithfully practiced, Troitsa indeed seems to serve two functions. First, it binds the living and the dead into a common sense of "*svoi*" (one's own). A community--some of the



members of which have passed to another world and have access to its forces--reestablishes itself. After all, the first sense of *rodina* is not Mother Russia, but motherland<sup>7</sup>-- the place that gave birth to me and that houses the dead that are mine. *Rodina* is the place that extends to the edges of *svoi*. It is the earth that houses one's own people. Coming to the graveyard and remembering the familial and the village "*rod*" unifies the community and serves a second purpose as well. It allows the living to take advantage of the force that the dead--as a *collective unit*--have access to. Their force can help make the soil fertile; help coax that force into the stuff of life. And what could be more crucial to a farmer without an irrigation system, without tractors and combines--who must watch the weather every hour of every day to out-guess its capriciousness and bring out the bounties of the land?

Troitsa is the day on which this remembering crescendos--as it is, one would hope, the time when the fertility of the land is most firmly ensured.

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The point of this paper is simple. The deeply pagan expression of Troitsa lasted because it continues to serve a meaningful function. It is fixed in memory for a reason. Though not adorned with maiden song or church hymns, it has its own music: its function is crucial to the physical, social and metaphysical operations of the agricultural community. Calendars, it can be said, are socially congealed memory; their commemorative days stand like milestones in a symbolic timescape. In this sense, the most basic pagan expressions of this holiday form the most deeply cut pathways in the landscape of memory. It is not without a certain irony that in spite of the Soviet state and the Orthodox church, this critical function is fulfilled at a fundamentally local level, indeed, at a brazenly local level—rendering, at this level of memory's landscape, those great powers irrelevant.

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## Notes

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1. Which represents the three aspects of God united in one sublime whole. *Sophia* here means "wisdom."

2. Froianov, I. Ia. et. al. 1991. "The Introduction of Christianity in Russia and the Pagan Traditions" in *Soviet Anthropology and Archaeology*. Winter 90-91, vol. 29, (3).

3. I heard several such stories in Anufriev and its surrounding villages, where early communists participated in the destruction of local churches suffered curses on themselves (untimely deaths) and the long line of their descendants (with punishments such as sickness and, worst of all, the inability to produce heirs).

4. Unlike on Easter, which was celebrated in the clubhouse of Anufriev for only the second time in the village's recent history. The local kul'trabotnik had taken it upon himself to prepare a presentation on the meaning of Easter, digging way back into the Old Testament for his research. Disappointingly for him, the villagers were almost singularly disinterested in his speech and much more excited about digging into the potluck food and drink they had all brought for the celebration. The point, with regards to Troitsa, is that no explanation, justification or urging is

required to get this holiday going. It needs no authority. It is in the hands of the villagers themselves.

5. *ne Uchastvuite v Delakh T'my* (1992), Father Vitalii Osipov.

6. this argument is treated in some detail in a chapter of my dissertation entitled, "Setting Space Right: Harnessing Otherworldly Powers and Healing."

7. Formal, distant *Mat' Rossiya* vs. close *Mama Rodina*.